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Photo by: Carol Rosegg

Bury the Dead PICK

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November 10, 2008

Reviewed by Gwen Orel

As woman after woman pleads with the dead soldier she loved to allow himself to be buried, in Transport Group's stylish production of Irwin Shaw's Bury the Dead, tears ran down my face. It's easy to see why this play is a favorite source for scene work in acting classes.

It's not a perfect rendition of Shaw's 1936 anti-war fantasy — it's twice as long as it ought to be and drags in places — but it has angry, sad, yet uplifting power. Written for the Group Theatre, though it opened on Broadway, Bury the Dead has been whittled down from a huge cast to seven, with one woman, Donna Lynne Champlin, playing all the female roles with virtuosic skill. Director Joe Calarco frames the play with a sketch called "A Town Hall Meeting," in which Champlin plays a small-town woman organizing a reading of Shaw's play. Though it's a little bit Waiting for Guffman, the sketch puts the play's context into the performance itself. Slides of different war memorials and details about Shaw, who wrote the play at just 22, are welcome.

Eventually the play itself takes over. The first third of Shaw's extended one-act feels drawn out; we get it, six men won't be buried, and the Washington scene feels like overkill. But once the women are sent to persuade them — a farmer's wife, a mother, an estranged sister — the angry elegy about the futility of war and poverty hits home. Calarco's direction is quick and assured, aided by hard-edged lighting by R. Lee Kennedy. The cast shines, particularly Jeremy Beck as a farmer who wonders about the color of his child's hair and Mandell Butler as a young boy who just wanted a chance to grow up. Champlin's final, fierce characterization of an angry young wife wondering what took all the poor soldiers so long to "stand up" thrills — as it's meant to.

Presented by the Transport Group



at the Connelly Theatre, 220 E. Fourth St., NYC.

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(212) 352-3101, (866) 811-4111, www.theatermania.com, or www.transportgroup.org.

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