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Yes, I know... Bury The Dead is not exactly the kind of title that's going to send box office sales into a tizzy. And sure, the Connelly Theatre, located on 4th Street between Avenues A & B, may be a perfectly lovely and intimate venue but it's a bit of an unpleasant hike from the nearest subway stop on a damp and chilly evening. But the seven-year-old Drama Desk and OBIE winning Transport Group has been regularly making the pilgrimage well worthwhile for playgoers seeking adventurous new material, inventive revivals and crackerjack acting. Their new spin on Irwin Shaw's 1936 anti-war drama is worth braving a hurricane from the Astor Place 6 line stop to get to. Hyperbole? Yes. So let me put it in more realistic terms. It would require one spectacular theatre season for this stirring and captivating re-imagination of Shaw's fascinating absurdist piece to not be considered one of its highlights. And if Donna Lynne Chaplin's performance is not considered one of the finest of the season it will mean we've been blessed with a year of staggering excellence in stage acting.



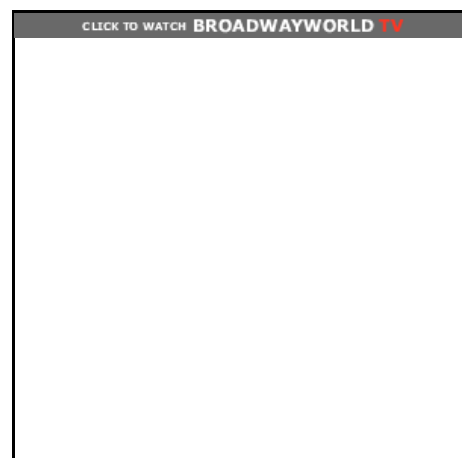
Premiering at the Barrymore Theatre and employing a cast of 32 actors, Irwin Shaw's first play takes place during, "the second year of the war that is to begin tomorrow night," and concerns a sextet of dead soldiers who refuse the services of those trying to

bury them and insist on going back home so they can live out the lives they haven't even started. The military and the press agree that the episode must be kept hush-hush, fearing their protests will lead to a decline in the public's support of the war, so they call on one significant woman from each soldier's life to try and convince her man to take it lying down.

Not quite a full evening's length, when Bury The Dead ran its 97 Broadway performances it was preceded by a short curtain-raiser. For Transport Group's production, which only employs 7 actors, director Joe Calarco has written a prelude, A Town Hall Meeting, that cleverly blends itself into Shaw's play and eases a modern audience into the world of 1930's protest drama.

When we first enter the theatre, set designer Sandra Goldmark's stage shows leftover evidence of several spirited events in a middle school auditorium, including a class election debate where, according the posters, Eddie was touting his experience while the word "choice" was prominent in Mary Jane's campaign. Giddily greeting us at the start is Donna Lynne Champlin as the music teacher known only as Our Host, wasting no time in passing out cookies to those in attendance. ("They're store bought I know, but I didn't have the time, it's mortifying I know, but I just didn't have the time.") With daffy enthusiasm Our Host explains that we all wouldn't be here tonight if not for one man... George Stephanopoulos. An avid viewer of This Week With George Stephanopoulos, his practice of scrolling the names and ages of the most recent American losses in Iraq and Afghanistan inspired her to take a trip to see the war memorials of Washington D.C. Taking note of how long after each war's conclusion it took to build its memorial, Our Host, figuring it's never too early to start remembering, has called this meeting to honor the war heroes and heroines of the current conflict.

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Though the program was planned to be, "a hodgepodge - a little this'n'that - read some poems and letters written by soldiers - so beautiful - and sing some war songs," at the last minute her star pupil suggested they do an impromptu reading of Irwin Shaw's *Bury The Dead*.

After drafting her reluctant husband (Jake Hart) into the cast, volunteers from the audience (Jeremy Beck, Fred Berman, Mandell Butler, Jeff Pucillo and Matt Sincell) cold read from the script while Our Host reads the stage directions. At first they simply read the words while seated at



table in their amateur attempts at performing but gradually, in bits and pieces at first, they abandon their scripts and actually inhabit their characters. It's not as though they've suddenly become better actors, but more like the forgotten play has refused to be buried among faded Broadway memories and has taken on a renewed life. At times this terrifies Our Host, who apparently has never read the script before, especially when she is called on to play all six women in separate scenes with each soldier.

Up until this point Champlin's innocent eccentric has served as a safety net to lighten the evening, but in the play's seamlessly presented final scenes she completely shifts into a series of contrasting and skillfully committed portrayals. She and Jeremy Beck are touching in their simple bewilderment as a rural farming couple. She's a hard-nosed dame in love with Fred Berman's slick, cheating party-boy. As the mother of Mandell Butler, who is so heartbreaking as the boy who mourns for the adult life he never had, she longs to once again see her son's baby face, unprepared for the sight of how it's been disfigured. There's an amusing romantic abrasiveness to the give and take between Champlin and Jake Hart, as her lug of a mechanic husband as they try and rehash their marriage.

R. Lee Kennedy's lights do an extremely effective job of taking us from the bright and safe world of the town hall meeting to the emotional complexity of the Shaw's play and its many locales. **Michael Rasbury's sound design also greatly adds to the texture of the piece.**

It's a bit of a cliché to say an old play is just as meaningful today as it was back then, but within his insightful concept Calarco, without altering the playwright's original work, effectively shows us contemporary people being overwhelmed by the relevance of a 72-year-old work of drama. **Given the subject matter it may seem trivial to call this dangerous theatre, but it is at the very least a risk-taking project and it succeeds brilliantly.**

Photos by Carol Rosegg: Top: Mandell Butler, Donna Lynne Champlin and Fred Berman; Bottom: Jake Hart and Donna Lynne Champlin

Posted on November 11, 2008 - by [Michael Dale](#)

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About the Author:After 20-odd years singing, dancing and acting in dinner theatres, summer stocks and the ever-popular audience participation murder mysteries (try improvising with audiences after they've had two hours of open bar), Michael Dale segued his theatrical ambitions into playwriting. The buildings which once housed the 5 Off-Off Broadway plays he penned have all been destroyed or turned into a Starbucks, but his name remains the answer to the trivia question, "Who wrote the official play of Babe Ruth's 100th Birthday?" He served as Artistic Director for The Play's The Thing Theatre Company, helping to bring free live theatre to underserved communities, and dabbled a bit in stage managing and in directing cabaret shows before answering the call (it was an email, actually) to become BroadwayWorld.com's first Chief Theatre Critic. While not attending shows Michael can be seen at Shea Stadium pleading for the Mets to stop imploding. Likes: Strong book musicals and ambitious new works. Dislikes: Unprepared celebrities making their stage acting debuts by starring on Broadway and weak bullpens.

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QUICK POLL

Three actors share the title role in Billy Elliot, alternating performances equally. How would you like to see the Tony Awards handle this unusual situation when it comes time to consider nomination eligibility? **7 comments**

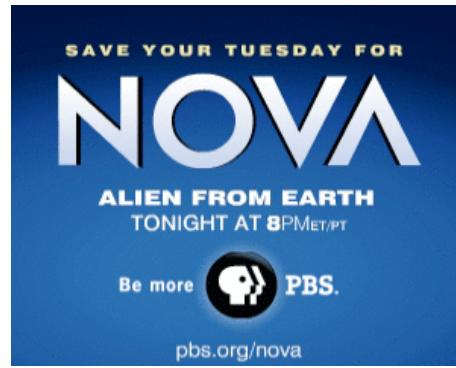
- Since they each average less than three performances a week they should not be considered for any Tony honors.
- If all three are considered deserving, they should receive a special honor.
- ... If all three are considered deserving. they should

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- receive a special Tony.
- They should keep the eligibility rule as is and only consider the actor who performs on opening night for a nomination.
- They should be eligible to share a nomination with a vote for one counting as a vote for all three.
- They each should be eligible for separate nominations with voters required to see all nominated Billys.
- I've got a better idea and will leave a comment.

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