



## CurtainUp

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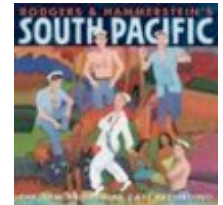
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## A *CurtainUp* Review *Bury the Dead*

By Elyse Sommer

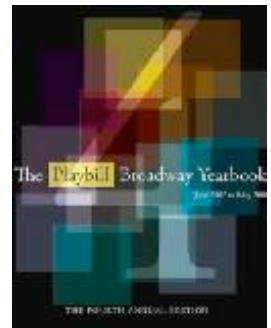
*Men must die for their country's sake—if not you, then others.  
This has always been. Men died for Pharaoh and Caesar and  
Rome two thousand years ago and more, and went into the earth  
with their wounds. Why not you?—Captain  
Men, even the men who die for Pharaoh and Caesar and Rome,  
must, in the end, before all hope is gone, discover that a man  
can die happy and be contentedly buried only when he dies for  
himself or for a cause that's his own and not Pharaoh's or  
Caesar's or Rome's.— Second Corpse*



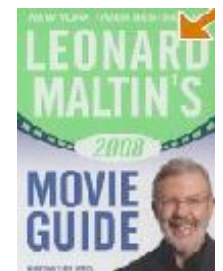
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### SITE GUIDE

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### ADVERTISING AT CURTAINUP

### FEATURES

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### LISTINGS Broadway Off-Broadway

### NYC Restaurants

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### Berkshires London California New Jersey Philadelphia Elsewhere

### QUOTES

### TKTS

### PLAYWRIGHTS' ALBUMS

### LETTERS TO EDITOR

### FILM

### LINKS

### MOBILE VERSION



Jake Hart & Donna Lynne Champlin  
(Photo: Carol Rosegg)

The war in Iraq has seeded its share of new plays. Among the more worthy are *Black Watch*, *In Conflict*, *Beast*, *Betrayed*. Irwin Shaw's *Bury the Dead* currently being presented by the Transport Group Theatre Company was written seventy-two years ago. It's not about a specific war but a reaction to how history has regularly sent young men off to kill and be killed. With the world just emerging from the painful first World War of the twentieth century, but already bracing for another conflict, Shaw, who was himself young enough to be drafted, set his play, "two years into the war that is about to begin tomorrow night." The result is an anti-any-war fable that, sad to say, has never become dated.

The fantastical yet all too real story of the war that was still an anticipatory nightmare in the playwright's mind revolves around six dead soldiers who refuse to allow themselves to be buried in the trench dug by two of their buddies. They stand up, one by one, explaining why they claim the right to not be covered up and forgotten. (for example: "I didn't chose to give my life for four yards of bloody mud," . . . "Maybe there's too many of us under the ground now. Maybe the earth can't stand it no more," . . . "We are reclaiming our home; we didn't ask for permission to leave.")

The ghostly rebellion in the battlefield throws the powers that be into a tizzy. It's an ironical twist on history since it threatens the established pattern of periodically waged wars fought by young patriots willing to fight, die and be buried — with memorials and soldiers cemeteries becoming sightseeing destinations. And so the generals accustomed to mapping combat strategies

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must now find a strategy to make the dead men lie down and be buried. The maneuver they come up with is to send the women the men left behind to persuade their loved ones to accept their place in the scheme of things—a world where peace is regularly interrupted by war.



There's no question about the timeliness of this fantastical farce about leaders who expect their youths to accept death before really living, often not for a cause of their own choosing. But the play's more than thirty characters pose a staging challenge, especially so for a small company with a budget too small to contemplate anything like the legendary Group Theater's premiere production in 1936. Not only did that company mount this first play by a still unknown writer, but they went all out by taking it right to Broadway with a 32-actor cast. I was pleased to see that the Transport Group was able to enlist the talented Joe Calarco, who knows how to make a virtue out of economical staging.



Calarco first made a name for himself as adapter and director of *R&R*, in which four schoolboys play all the parts in *Romeo & Juliet*. This much praised high concept adaptation has since traveled all over the world. During recent summers, I saw Calarco again display his multi-faceted talents with several productions for Barrington Stage's Musical Theater Lab. He gracefully directed *The Burnt Part Boys* so that its lack of sophisticated production values was barely noticeable. He not only directed but wrote the libretto for *The Mysteries Of Harris Burdick* inspired by a children's book of the same name.

Now, Calarco has pared down all those characters in *Bury the Dead* so that six actors play all the male parts, and Transport favorite, Donna Lynne Champlin takes on all the women. The actors are capable multi-taskers. So far so good. But Calarco, not content with just streamlining his production, has once again donned his hat as a writer by adding a prologue to Shaw's script. Titled *A Town Meeting*, that add-on is an interesting device for bringing the two great wars between which Shaw set his play into the present.

Unfortunately, the tone of the introductory material is off-putting and keeps us too long from the material that packs the strongest emotional wallop. By making the host and organizer of his Town Hall Meeting a rather silly chatterbox who begins by breaking the fourth wall and handing out cookies to the audience, Calarco is obviously making a point about people going on with their hum drum, entertainment geared lives even as their young countrymen are dying in a far away war. Some of the entertainment (like tv commentator George Stephanopoulos's practice of scrolling the names of the dead soldiers in Iraq and Afghanistan) penetrates enough for the narrator/hostess to try to wake up her fellow townspeople to more awareness with a reading of *Bury the Dead*. However, Champlin a fine actress (and singer) is directed to be more irritating than engaging in this role, so that we don't really connect with her until the painful scenes where she plays the women sent to persuade their fallen loved ones to follow the generals' bidding. The most devastating of these scenes has her portraying a mother, who insists that her young son who had half his face blown off (a touching Mandell Butler) remove his bandages so she can see him one last time.

The idea of e Stephanopoulos' weekly scrolling of casualty lists to trigger the idea for a reading of *Bury the Dead* and perhaps get involved in a memorial works in the sense that the volunteer readers from the audience, segue quite smoothly from awkward readers into active participants in the Shaw drama. (The agility with which the actors leap from the audience to the theater's stage is a poignant contrast with what happens to their once equally agile characters' bodies). But the narrator's humorous asides aren't especially funny and are too long and intrusive.

Irwin Shaw survived the war to enjoy a successful writing career but he never

forgot his concerns about the effects of war. After being blacklisted as a Communist during the McCarthy era, he left the country for which he risked becoming one of the many who laid down their lives and spend the rest of his life (he died in 1984) in Europe. I think he'd be gratified to see productions of *Bury the Dead* by two adventurous theater companies — but sad, if not surprised, that the pattern of periodic wars goes on.

#### LINKS

[Bury the Dead-- Los Angeles production](#)

[Burnt Part Boys](#)

[The Myseries of Harris Burdick](#)

[Shakespeare's R & R](#)

Bury the Dead by Irwin Shaw  
 preceded by: A Town Hall Meeting by Joe Calarco  
 Directed by Joel Calarco

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Cast: (in order of appearance) Donna Lynne Champlin (Our Host/Bess Schelling/Joan/Julia Blake/Katherine Driscoll/Mrs. Dean/Martha Webster), Jake Hart (A Townsperson/Third Soldier/Second General/Bevins/ Private Webster), Fred Berman ( A Townsperson/A Sergeant/A Doctor/An Editor/Private Henry Levy), Mandell Butler ( A Townsperson/Second Soldier/A Stenographer/A Reporter/Private James Dean), Matt Sincell ( A Townsperson/First Soldier/A Whore/Private Walter Morgan), Jeff Pucillo (A Townsperson/First General/Private Tom Driscoll) Jeremy Beck ( A Townsperson/A Captain/Charlie/Private John Schelling)

Scenic design: Sandra Goldmark

Costumes: Kathryn Rohe

Lighting: R. Lee Kennedy

Sound design: Michael Rasbury ←

Stage Manager: Donald Butchko

Running Time: 1 hour and 40 minutes

Transport Group at the Connelly Theater 220 East 4 Street (212) 560-4372

[www.transportgroup.org](http://www.transportgroup.org)

< From 10/31/08; opening 11/09/08; closing 11/23/08

Reviewed by Elyse Sommer November 6th press preview

#### REVIEW FEEDBACK

Highlight one of the responses below and click "copy" or"CTRL+C"

- I agree with the review of Bury the Dead
- I disagree with the review of Bury the Dead
- The review made me eager to see Bury the Dead

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