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Theatre in Review: *Bury the Dead* (Transport Group/Connelly Theatre)

The people at **Transport Group** are never afraid of a challenge, and in *Bury the Dead*, they've taken on a real whopper -- seeking a meaningful way to put on a famous, but arguably unstageable, antiwar classic. That they nearly succeed should tell you plenty about the level of talent involved.

Bury the Dead, which ran 97 performances in 1936, is a product of Broadway's socially conscious Depression years, when the likes of Clifford Odets and the Group Theatre rubbed shoulders with Cole Porter and Kaufman and Hart. Because of its heartfelt sincerity and prescient anti-war message -- and also because Shaw became a prominent screenwriter and best-selling novelist -- the play is well-remembered, if rarely staged outside of college theatre departments. The latter fact is not surprising; it calls for 28 actors, the action is spread over many locations, and the story line is relentlessly grim. The central conceit, in which six dead soldiers stand up in their graves, refusing to be buried, is like a lost episode of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone*. The point of view is strictly '30s: it's an Expressionist mural, depicting a nefarious conspiracy of generals and industrialists that turns working men into cannon fodder.

To try and connect this dated piece to the present moment -- and to find a way around its immense staging challenges -- the director, **Joe Calarco**, has come up with a prologue featuring **Donna Lynne Champlin** as a community organizer type who enters onto **Sandra Goldmark**'s school auditorium set, asking for volunteers to take part in a reading of *Bury the Dead*. A half-dozen actors, all planted around the auditorium, respond, sitting down to a long table and woodenly reading their lines, while Champlin interrupts with stage directions.

It's not a promising opening: Champlin's chatter -- about her trip to Washington, D.C. (slides are provided) and her crush on George Stephanopoulos -- quickly becomes grating, and the early play-reading sequence is about as gripping as any cold reading by amateurs might be. However, it's not long before the play takes on a life of its own, and Calarco's staging -- driven by the intense performances and aided by **R. Lee Kennedy's** noir-ish lighting and **Michael Rasbury's** you-are-there battle sound effects -- builds in excitement.

There are many memorable stage pictures. The lighting reveals an array of soldiers' graves, while, at stage right, an actor sits at a piano, playing, "I Can't Give You Anything But Love Baby." An upstage projection screen rises to reveal the lineup of soldiers who refuse to stay dead. A soldier arches his body out across the proscenium, trying to make out voices emanating a grave. Throughout, Champlin, who plays most of the female roles, remains a point of focus -- she's the one performer who doesn't entirely abandon her contemporary persona -- and her growing dismay at the waste and carnage around her provides us with a direct route into Shaw's vision. Taken together, these elements combine to suggest the knockout punch *Bury the Dead* must have packed for its first audiences.

At the same time, Calarco and company can do little to disguise the fact that *Bury the Dead* doesn't have much to offer in the way of drama; the script simply brings on new sets of characters to state the same thesis over and over. The action climaxes in a sequence in which a female relative of each of the six soldiers begs her loved one to lie down. There are some effective moments here -- I was chilled to the bone by a wife informing her dead husband "Your name would look so well on a nice chunk of marble" -- but it's far too much of a good thing, and, by the play's end, I, too, was eager for those unhappy men to hie themselves off to eternity at the earliest possible moment.

Still, there's plenty of imagination at work here and, if you ever had the desire to see *Bury the Dead*, this is probably your best chance for doing so. Champlin, Transport Group's de facto leading lady, works hard and well, and she's aided by a talented cast of six young men who adeptly take on the roles of soldiers, generals, politicians, journalist, businessmen, and whores. This isn't a success on the level of the company's revivals of *All the Way Home* and *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*, but it does provide a fresh look at a vintage play that still has something to say.

If *Bury the Dead* is more notable for what it tries to do than what it achieves, it still confirms Transport Group as one of our most interesting companies, one which is capable of giving a fresh slant to even the most traditional material. Personally, I find it impossible not to look forward to its next production. --David Barbour

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PLASA Media, Inc. 80 Fifth Avenue, Suite 1201, New York, NY 10011
Tel: 212-352-2334, Fax: 212-675-6717
www.lightingandsoundamerica.com
LSA@plasa.org