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Peter Filichia's DIARY

November 12, 2008

High Schoolers' Non-Musical

After the ticket-taker dutifully dealt with my ticket, before I actually entered the Connolly Theatre, I heard a voice coming from the stage. Was I late? I consulted my watch, and saw that it was 1:50, a full 10 minutes before the Saturday matinee of Irwin Shaw's *Bury the Dead* was scheduled to begin. Besides, the house lights were still up, so what was going on?

I went in, and when I saw a lone woman on stage and a packed house full of teenagers, I figured it out. This was a field trip from some school, which is why the kids were getting such questions as "Has anyone here ever been to a play before?" Few had. Then there was a good deal of talk on how they were expected to behave.

I supposed such a speech is necessary. Even so-called adults have been known to prattle on their cells or chomp on KFC in the middle of a performance. I had a feeling the kids would rise to the occasion and be polite, but that's not what worried me. Whenever I'm in a group like this, I just hope and pray that they'll like the show.

The house lights dimmed, and of course some kids squealed "Ooooooh!" in mock-horror, while the more mature hissed out a "Shhhh!" Out came Donna Lynne Champlin in a dress so dull that even Wal-Mart would refuse to sell it. When she started telling us about her love for George Stephanopolous - who was born a good quarter-century after *Bury the Dead's* 1936 debut on Broadway - I reached for my program to see what was going on.

I'd seen *Bury the Dead* before, and know it's the surrealistic story of soldiers who have just been killed in a war, but before they can be buried, rise in protest and flatly refuse to be interred. These soldiers are young, they're in love, and that they've been killed strikes them as no reason why they have to literally go under the earth now and forever.

On the title page of the program, I saw, "*Bury the Dead*, a play by Irwin Shaw" but under it was "Preceded by *A Town Hall Meeting* by Joe Calarco," right above his "Directed by Joe Calarco" credit. I gave out a slight moan. Nothing against Champlin, who's one of my favorite performers, but if I'm coming to see *Bury the Dead*, I want to see *Bury the Dead* as Shaw wrote it. Guess Calarco felt that because *Bury the Dead* is only a one-act play, it wasn't enough for a full entertainment, so he had to give us a little more.

But I moaned again when I saw what he gave us -- not because it wasn't well-written (it was), but because the character that Champlin was playing -- "Our Host" -- was not unlike that pretentious idiot, Ms. Darbus in *High School Musical*. She was just as oh-so-grahnd and utterly silly, and I was afraid the kids were thinking, "Yup, this is what I thought a play would be like. Somebody stupidly high-class who's very la-de-da." Perhaps they were mollified a bit when she came into the audience and gave everyone a cookie; that doesn't happen, does it, kids, at the movies or at the computer? Still, such largess fell in the category of strange behavior, and I feared that the kids would eventually tune out.

Our Host talked about the various wars our country has endured -- including our current one -- and said she ran across the play *Bury the Dead* by Irwin Shaw -- "You know," she said, "The author of *Rich Man, Poor Man*?" No, they didn't know, and that title, meant to clarify, only baffled them more. Not only were they not around when Shaw wrote *Rich Man, Poor Man* in 1969, but there's also a good chance that many of their parents weren't

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Another red flag went up for me when Our Host said she wanted to “do a reading” of *Bury the Dead*. Did the kids understand the concept? But Our Host was soon asking for volunteers, got some pre-positioned actors from the house, gave them scripts, put them at a long table, and had them start reading aloud. What did the kids in the audience make of this? They’re probably said to themselves, “THIS is a professional show? Hey, even in my high school, the kids who put on plays at least learn the lines.”

Luckily, the show soon moved into full production, where six wonderful actors played soldiers, their commanding officers, and other small parts, too. Did the kids understand the concept of doubling, or were they utterly confused? They did laugh any time a profane word was used – kids always will -- but soon the young man to my left was officially chin-on-chest asleep. (There was no one to my right; there had been, but he turned out to be one of those audience-plant actors who went on stage.)

But the sleepy young man awoke when the kids around him laughed. What caused it? The use of profanity, of course. Even though the Connolly will never be confused with the splendors of, say, the Walter Kerr, no kid ever expects that the theater will offer a “swear.”

They didn’t expect they’d hear “dirty” talk, either, but then came a reference to “two whores,” and, again the kids gasped in delighted if semi-shocked surprise. But what happened next worried me again – because one of the men in the cast was going to portray one of those prostitutes, which meant he mimed an application of lipstick, and gestured in a pronounced feminine way. Experienced theatergoers know this a type of non-traditional casting, but these kids were now roaring their contempt for the effeminate performance. I feared that this reinforced a notion they has when they walked in the theater: It’s for the less-than-masculine. Luckily, the scene didn’t last long, and the show got back on its serious track.

We may think that Thornton Wilder, in *Our Town*, was the first to dramatize an appreciation for the so-called mundane but really important things in life. But apparently Shaw beat him to the punch two years earlier with this 1936 play, for we heard a soldier talk about how much he used to appreciate mere drinks of water. And wonder of wonders, miracle of miracles, the kid next to me stayed awake, and was soon even leaning forward. That young people shouldn’t meet death so soon must be something to which he could relate. This young man may have had the experience that many young men before him have had: Being at home, the phone rings, he answers, and finds a military recruiter on the other end.

Champlin wound up playing the sweethearts, wives, and mothers of the various refuse-to-stay-dead soldiers, and she, like everyone else – Jeremy Beck, Fred Berman, Mandell Butler, Jake Hart, Jeff Pucillo, and Matt Sincell – was magnificent. (Most performers who work for the Transport Group Theatre Company are.) You could have filmed a Sprint commercial during the scene where Champlin, as a mother of a head-bandaged soldier, said, “Let me see your face,” in an unafraid voice, for she’s his mother, she loves him, and what if he now does have a face that only a mother could love? She’ll love it. But just as Christine in *Phantom* didn’t know what she was in for, so too was this woman unprepared for the reality and the horror of what she saw when her son uncovered his face.

The kids were with it now, and paid rapt attention until the end, when they applauded appreciatively. No standing ovation, though, but that was all right; I suspect it’s more because they hadn’t been trained to give this knee-jerk response, and not that they weren’t pleased and impressed with the show. Once the house lights went up, I heard that marvelous gurgle of post-theater chat, showing that they couldn’t wait to compare notes with their pals.

Funny; on Tuesday, I wrote a negative review of *High School Musical* at the Paper Mill Playhouse in Millburn, New Jersey, and three readers contacted me to complain. “Don’t you see that such a show is getting kids to go to the theater?” they asked. Yes, but at what cost? Is it really worth it to give kids inferior material just to get them into a playhouse? All that seems to be happening is that we’re getting more and more lousy work aimed at indiscriminating kids.

I say that if we bring young people to quality work, they’ll understand at least some of it, maybe more, and will be impressed with as much as they understand. Maybe this audience at *Bury the Dead* will never comprehend why Calarco wrote *A Town Hall Meeting* (who could?) or why so few actors were playing so many. But nobody’s going to make me believe that these kids didn’t get Irwin Shaw’s important message: War unfairly takes a number of promising lives, and that’s too great a cost for any country. That’s something well worth hearing, but can we say the same for a song that urges a kid to “get your head in the game” no fewer than 38 times?

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