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Bury the Dead

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Reviewed By: Andy Propst · Nov 10, 2008 · New York

Joe Calarco brings Irwin Shaw's 1936-anti war play Bury the Dead to life with marvelous and affecting simplicity in a novel production for the Transport Group, now at the Connelly Theatre. While written nearly three-quarters of a century ago in a time of peace, the work easily manages to have the power to move 21st-century audiences who are living through a time of war.

Shaw's drama -- considered absurdist for its time -- centers on a war that's run into its second year with no end in sight. When a group of soldiers attempts to bury a half-dozen men killed in battle, the corpses rise up in the mass grave into which they've been placed, refusing to be interred. This act of posthumous civil disobedience sends military leaders into panic mode. Journalists want to write about it, but editors fear the effect it might have on the nation's perception of and support for the war.

Ultimately, the military brass must rely on a group of women close to one of the dead soldiers in life (and all of whom are played with touching conviction and an attention to detail by Donna Lynne Champlin) to convince the uncooperative corpses to acquiesce to their burial. Through these scenes, the men's regrets about their lives, their disappointment over things they will never experience, and in the final, and most gut-wrenching encounter, one man's belief that he finally must stand up against injustice, become painfully clear.

What's novel about this production, however, is that Calarco has devised a curtain-raiser for the actual play called A Town Hall Meeting -- a monologue in which the effervescent Champlin plays "Our Host," a modern-day woman who proffers cookies to theatregoers as she describes why she's gathered them at her local middle school. She's become aware of the mounting death toll in Iraq, thanks to George Stephanopoulos' weekly Sunday broadcasts, and she hopes that she might motivate her neighbors to some sort of action about the war by hosting a staged reading of Shaw's play.

Meanwhile, six actors (Jeremy Beck, Fred Berman, Mandell Butler, Jake Hart, Jeff Pucillo, and Matt Sincell) play all of the male roles, from the men first attempting to bury their fallen comrades to the dead men themselves. Although the initial few minutes of Shaw's play, which unfold as a cold reading performed by these men acting as untrained amateurs, are awkward, their woodenness gives way to passion as the piece gathers momentum and the power of Shaw's script overtakes them.

Slowly, they become immersed in the world and drama of this fictitious war -- as does the audience, thanks to the effective work of R. Lee Kennedy, whose dramatic lighting design allows the drama to shift from location to location with ease, and Michael Rasbury's soundscape, which alternates between the bombastic and the gently atmospheric.

Shaw's play bears the hallmarks of youthful excess -- he was just 23 when he wrote it -- and the period's taste for grandiose declamation; but each member of the ensemble gives a fiercely committed performance that manages to almost fully mask some of the plays' creakier moments. Hart's simultaneously amusing and heartbreaking turn as the frustrated mechanic who's been killed in battle, Berman's portrayal of the conflicted sergeant initially overseeing the burial, and Pucillo's commanding performance as a member of the army brass who needs the situation on the frontlines to come to an end are among the production's particular highlights.

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Donna Lynne Champlin and Fred Berman in Bury the Dead (© Carol Rosegg)



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