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Off Broadway

Bury the Dead (Connelly Theater; 99 seats; \$38 top)

By MARILYN STASIO

A Transport Group Theater presentation of a play in one act by Irwin Shaw, with additional material by Joe Calarco. Directed by Calarco.

- Host - Donna Lynne Champlin
- Private Schelling - Jeremy Beck
- Private Levy - Fred Berman
- Private Dean - Mandell Butler
- Private Webster - Jake Hart
- Private Driscoll - Jeff Pucillo
- Private Morgan - Matt Sincell



Jake Hart and Donna Lynne Champlin star in Joe Calarco's revival of 'Bury the Dead' Irwin Shaw's 1936 anti-war play.

Hard to believe Irwin Shaw wrote "Bury the Dead" in 1936, between the War to End All Wars and all the wars to come. The angry, searing pacifist drama feels as up-to-date and urgent as an incoming text message. To pump up the sense of immediacy of this enduring classic, helmer Joe Calarco has written a framework it doesn't really need. But after a fumbling start at stitching both pieces together, Calarco and his well-drilled ensemble (a hallmark of the estimable Transport Group) settle down to the harrowing task of guiding us through Shaw's hellish nightmare.

Pointedly opening "two years into the war that is to begin tomorrow night," Shaw's expressionistic masterpiece makes a mockery of the pseudo-patriotic war-mongering of belligerent nations by giving a voice to the foot soldiers who pay for the war games their leaders play.

The revolt is all the more horrifying for being impromptu. A platoon of dead soldiers refuses to go into the graves being prepared for them by a military burial detail. One by one they stand up in resistance, demanding to be heard, pleading for their lost lives. "I'm only 20," one of them says, making his case without wasting a word.

Unable to contain the spreading word of the rebellion, the military brass tries to crush it by first ordering and then begging the soldiers to accept their fate and toddle off to their graves. When that has no effect, they call up the big guns -- the women.

One by one they come, the wives, mothers, sisters and sweethearts of the fallen soldiers, and in the most riveting of the play's multiple scenes, they plead for explanations that will help them understand the "unnatural" behavior of their men. More than Shaw's agitprop declarations and his clarion calls for political action, these quietly heartbreaking scenes are the real meat of the play.

Called upon to play the cameo roles that more than 30 actors undertook in the Group Theater's original Broadway production, seven stalwart Transport Group members shoulder them all. They work seamlessly as an ensemble, but you can almost hear them sigh with relief when they are allowed to settle into one role and get to the heart of that character's argument for more life beyond an early death.

Donna Lynne Champlin, who plays all the weeping, angry and despairing women, is especially rewarded by the breathing space. She is moving as the wife of the farmer who longs to see another spring (beautiful job from Jeremy Beck), sadder still as the mother of that 20-year-old boy, and quite rousing as the mechanic's wife who yells at him for waiting until he was dead before taking a stand against the many injustices of his life.

The simplicity and directness of Shaw's language are not only more suitable for corpses than windy speeches, they are also more effective at delivering the scribe's angry message. "They should be alive now." "Kids shouldn't be dead." "I got big important things to say" are pretty devastating lines to hear in this context.

To their credit, Beck, Matt Sincell, Fred Berman, Jake Hart, Jeff Pucillo and Mandell Butler (who comes into his

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own as the baby soldier) all succeed at creating distinct characters for their admittedly iconic soldier-boy roles. As directed by Calarco, the all-important reunion scenes have a stillness to them that intensifies their emotional impact and makes the strongest argument for Shaw's anti-war themes.

As for that original framing idea from Calarco -- a town hall meeting at which a jittery community organizer (a less certain Champlin) urges her neighbors to join the soldiers' anti-war protest -- it isn't at all bad. But this civics lesson feels abbreviated (in the sketchy writing), confusing (in the absence of true characters) and imperfectly defined (by the primitive lighting).

Who are we? Where are we? And what is expected of us? That's all we need to know from a framework. With additional work, this one could yet do its job.

Set, Sandra Goldmark; costumes, Kathryn Rohe; lighting, R. Lee Kennedy; **sound, Michael Rasbury**; production stage manager, Wendy Patten. Opened Nov. 9, 2008. Reviewed Nov. 6. Running time: 1 HOUR, 40 MIN. 

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All Contenders

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