

Canadian play successful

Theater review by Beno John

Waiting for the Parade; "Faces of Women in the War," is one of those rare productions in which an original gem of a script finds itself in the hands of a sensitive and tightly knit cast. The National Arts Centre Theatre Company has made an excellent selection for its fall tour, which, after opening in Edmonton, will visit 20 cities and towns throughout the Canadian Northwest.

John Murrell's tight script, David Hamblen's direction and John Ferguson and Gayle Trebick's modest but evocative set transformed SUB's concert stage into a warm, intimate space where we could watch five women re-enact a bygone lifestyle against the backdrop of the second world war, a back drop which is always looming in our popular imagination because of the dozens of novels, movies and T.V. serials devoted to the subject.

The second world war has been tossed around for sensationalism's sake in every medium for so long, that we have a distorted perspective of how the war affected any place that was not Dunkirk, Dresden, Dieppe, Stalingrad, Malta, Conventry, Pearl Harbour, or Hiroshima. Perhaps this play's only connection to that kind of Hollywood world is the somewhat odd coincidence that the play was staged in SUB on the eve of the Battle of Britain.

Waiting for the Parade takes us to a very different world - Calgary to be exact - and into the lives of five women, who are as refreshingly far away from war hype as many actual women in Calgary at that time were. That is not to say that the women in Murrell's play are not affected by the war, but simply that they are affected in a manner that the war takes on a very distant, incomprehensible quality.

The two women most directly affected by the war have men stationed in Europe. Margaret (Jean Orenstein), an older British immigrant, has two sons taken away from her; one is in Europe, the other is jailed for being a communist. Her somewhat unfounded old world pessimism about seeing her sons alive again is contrasted with the despair of Catherine (Carole Galloway), whose husband is stationed somewhere at the front. What is devastatingly honest in the depiction of these women is that the war is so far away for them that all they care to understand is the absence of their men. Life without them must continue, and in their own way the women become stronger and more independent.

Catherine comes to the painful, but realistic conclusion that memories have to be sustained,

otherwise they gradually vanish. First the hands, then the limbs, the eyes and finally the face of her husband gradually leave Catherine's memory, a process that parallels the cold efficiency which actually decimates the men in action.

Marta (Patricia Ludwick), a young woman who arrived in Canada from Germany at the age of ten, is directly affected by the war in a different way. Her Germanic roots, though hardly defined enough to be called German, let alone Nazi, invites outright persecution and she is eventually subjected to the indignity of having her father sent to a POW camp because of his fondness for German literature and German music.

The other two women have husbands who have managed to stay home. Eve (Karen Wood), a young school teacher is married to a man who was too old for active service, but manages to serve his country by patrolling the Calgary reservoir to prevent-presumably-German infiltration. He gets into the idea of war so much that he greets his wife at breakfast with his friendly *ack-ack* imitations of a machine gun. Eve's perception of the war is more realistically determined by the number of highschool students it steals from her school every year.

Janet's (Nancy Kerr) husband does not enlist for the war. She tries to compensate for her guilt, shame and compulsiveness by heading a women's support-the-war-effort group which puts together care packages of fruit and personal hygiene kits for the "boys" passing through Calgary, on their way to the front.

All the women, with the obvious exception of the German Marta, work under the authoritarian Janet at

this do-gooder, but essentially useless task. For Catherine, Margret, and Eve, their volunteer work is nothing more than an opportunity for companionship while for Janet it is a convenient way to deal with her guilt, shame and meaningless marriage.

The total effect of these women thrown together is that they are preoccupied with tasks that are so irrelevant to the war. The younger women, especially, are involved in the new world. They are caught up in the exuberance of the wartime pop music which underlines their North American life styles and is light years away from the death struggles of the old world.

One slightly irritating aspect of this production is that there were no credits given for the music that was used extensively throughout the play. The music, well selected and well arranged brought a nice touch of immediacy to the production.

Of the acting, which was masterful all round, special mention should be made of Karen Wood as Eve. She displayed incredible range in portraying a young woman caught between the vibrancy of her youth and the hard, intellectual awareness of what the war is doing to her students. Joan Orenstein as Margaret; displayed with great delicacy and understanding the warmth, sensitivity and depth of a woman who has the most to lose.

Waiting for the Parade is a fresh, provocative play produced beautifully by the National Arts Centre Theatre Company. More importantly, it is a uniquely Canadian play which cuts through three decades of sentimentalism, sensationalism and misguided patriotism which, in general, has distorted our general perception of something that was quite ugly, senseless and wasteful.

Beneath the surface

Theatre review by Jeff Wildman

I was so much looking forward to the production of Tony Bell's, *Till Human Voices Wake Us*, that I rushed back from the far end of the universe to see it. I went with my close friend, Apollo, who always has ideas. There was no doubt that I would enjoy the evening out.

How did it strike you? Apollo seemed to be thinking at me when we were later sitting in his house. I tried to draw up the answer from the depths of my mind's ocean. Something bright and large swam there. It was unidentifiable. More thought was needed to haul the "answer" into reality. You? I thought back. Apollo had landed his thoughts and spoke aloud:

"The play itself has a sound construction and proves itself able in many ways. It did seem to lack, however, the highest polish that comes from a self-contained reality. The flaws in the play are not insurmountable and I would say that the playwright has the critical ability to see where he could tidy up."

"Self-contained reality? Tidy up? What do you mean?" I asked.

"A play develops, events happen, characters reveal themselves, situations need to have a cause and effect within the wholeness of the work. Themes are to be threaded skillfully into the fabric of the plot. For a play to be successful, it seems to me, an integrity of Reality (everyday reality, theatrical reality), or some particular version of the rules and conventions that give unity to the conception of the play must be totally in the service of the playwright. I might suggest that the tidying up might come with the control the playwright exercises over the play's inner reality. Contrivance and

exploitation are fine arts in theatre and must be used to create a Real background, an inner reality for the Life of the play.

"Was this missing?" I asked.

"The malaise of the characters and their frustration was too glib. Often times I could not decide whether Tony Bell was giving his characters lines to say that came from his own holistic conception of what should come next or if he was truly letting the characters say what they had to say."

"Apollo, I couldn't decide if what you describe was the fault of the playwright or the actors who served the play. Certainly the actors had a bad time encompassing the depth and dimension of the characters' inner lives. Each performance had its moments of realization but the intensity of the angst with which the characters were touched seemed to numb the actors. As an actor, to vibrate with the inner life behind the character's lines is a most difficult achievement."

"A playwright wants to give his characters Life but the characters must give themselves Life. Inside a playwright's mind, characters live as in a bell jar, safe from alien elements that test their life. But once outside of a playwright's mind, and into the world, a character's life can evaporate like rubbing alcohol on your skin, I think Bell's achievement is in creating a play that pushes and pulls, draws and drains, leaving the audience with an ambiguous but restless awareness that one's own Life is ticking away."

I thought about what Apollo had been saying but I felt that my judgement of the play was like my first image of something large and bright: a presence of substance that had not entirely broken the surface.

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