Ritualized inertia in small town America

Thonton Wilder's mini-classic Our Town reviewed by Kwame Dawes

Director: Robbie O'Neill . Design: Danny Silk . Producer: Marcel Brideau . Supervisiong Professor: Kathleen Scherf.

study of why Thornton Wilder

play Our Town has been so widely produced in North America should reveal a great deal about the peculiar North American fixation with the staid and conservative world that has come to be known as "small town America." The answers may help us appreciate the mythic fascination with this frontier-like world of middle America.

Set in New Hampshire, the home, interestingly of the virtually extinct Shakers sect (whose close-knit community reminds this writer of "Our Town"), Our Town is a very uncomplicated play about what Wilder assumes to have been life in a small American town at the turn of the century. In three acts we are taken through the three stages of life as perceived by conservative America - birth, marriage and death. The characters are cartoonlike and painfully dull and inconsequential. They do very little that surprises the village or the viewer for that matter. Nothing exceptionally interesting happens in the town; life simply goes on in that inexhorable fashion that is trustworthy, predictable, and essentially dull.

"Our Town" is a segregated community that never deals with (or is apparently never forced to deal with) its attitudes to race. The Polish people - foriegners who are reported to be taking over the community - are heard of in the first act and never heard of again. The villagers are far more concerned with gossiping about the clergy man who has a problem with the bottle and the ... well there is little else of a scandalous nature in the little quaint

Rituals of family life: several hundred thousand meals cooked by a wife all her life, marriage at an early age, death at child birth and the attendant funeral, courtship and rugged but long-lasting marriages. are all granted ample attention in the piece. Wilder is unrelenting in his portrayal of the boredom and repetition of the life of the village.

To the credit of the cast and crew of this production, the same pattern of repeated images was maintained throughout the piece. Robbie O'Neill direction entailed the establishment of a series of ritualistic patterns of behaviour which were repeated with careful detail throughout the production. The effect was deadening and without the intelligent and witty playing of a few of the actors in the

company, this sense of inertia would have completely overwhelmed the production. However, O'Neill's direction was extremely tidy and at moments reflected a tremendous amount of hard work.

There were funny moments in the production. The old professor's speech about the history of the town, while lacking in weight and

volume, was handled with a clever piece of caricature and satire by the actor Willie Hodgson. Paula Dawson who played one of the mothers in the piece has an extremely expressive

face and her delivery and timing were at while being visually appealling almost intimes quite impressive. Her ability to gain troduced a touch of burlusque when the

which was appropriate for the part. Especially competent was Frank Findlay who played the role of narrator (stagemanager). Granted a more central role than other productions of the play have given to this character, the young actor handle the rapport with the audience and the multuplicity of

"Well, normally I am completely bored out of my skull after an hour of theatre, and yet I am still watching this piece and wide awake. Heck, I even

laughed...must be alright."

character roles played with skill. He shifted

from preacher, to old lady, to soda fountain owner with agility and control.

The final scene in the graveyard was very evocative in conveying a sense eerieness and death. The smoke effect,

weight through the creation of a portly gait audience members began coughing uncon-

in the expressions: the startling contrast between the living and the dead; and the powerful moment in which the dead attempted to distance themselves from the grieving living.

Saddly, the tone that was approriate for the final scene was often apparent in some of the eralier scenes. One had the feeling that the actors had not had a chance to relax and enjoy the play. Their seriousness even during moments that demanded a certain playfulness and exuberance, drained the play of much of its limitted vibrancy. Arguably, the rigidity of the blocking, along with the flatness of characterization were merely an inevitable consequence of doing a script that at no point attempts to draw the audience into the unpredictability of human existence. Our Town is a boring town and one couldn't help feeling a certain sense of relief that this is merely the romanticized or satirized (?) interpretation of small town life.

However, one must not blame the cast and crew of the production for what is essentially a script problem. Despite its limita-

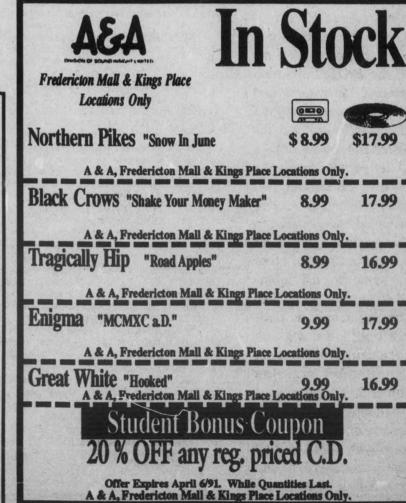
tions, the play has a fairly large cast and the sparse style demands studied and carefully rehearsed techniques of mime, movement and some singing. These are important tools to be learnt by budding actors. As this is the work of a credit course in drama at UNB (English 2140), there is no question that the decision to stage this play was a good one.

If it is of any consolation, I overheard an audience member grant far greater praise to the show than my review has done. The chap, when asked about the show during the second intermission said: "Well, normally I am completely bored out of my skull after an hour of theatre, and yet I am still watching this piece and wide awake. Heck, I even laughed...must be alright." Yes, it was alright.



Rich textures and ritualized performance in Thornton Wilde's Our Town staged by English 2140 at Memorial Hall.

and to assume the controlled and stable trollably as the smoke filled their lungs. But manners of a forty-something year old the direction here was imaginative - the still mother was commendable. In this regard, and whitshe outshone some of her fellow actors in enedfaces of the production. The young female protago- the dead; the nist of the piece, played by Heidi Killoran monotone while being somewhat slow on her cues a n d managed to achieve a quality of innocence emotionlessness



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