

Woking Drama Festival 2009

Blue Remembered Hills by Dennis Potter

Ottershaw Players

Adjudicated by Paul Fowler GODA

The Play

It is a crying shame to my mind that we didn't have more stage work from Dennis Potter- even this 1979 piece, probably his most performed theatrical work, first appeared on the television.

He was consistently inventive, always theatrical in the widest sense of the word and he invariably had something to say beneath the surface of the work itself.

He also nearly always had a gimmick up his sleeve - in this case the portrayal of a bunch of seven year olds by adult actors.

Blue Remembered Hills is an attempt to capture a snapshot of the past - not just the specific wartime past of Peter, Willie and their pals, but the general past we each carry inside us.

In his forward potter says he wants his adult actors to be used as a "seismograph" to measure the "quirks and tremors of childhood's emotions."

These are human beings at the very moment when their awareness of self and others and the world around them is undergoing its first glorious flowering, they are raw, part formed and full of wonder and half understood knowledge.

This is not a play about a load of grown ups pretending to be kids. It is about you and me and how we become the way we are. Understand that

and the problems of the play will begin to seem less daunting, though they will still be considerable.

The actors - in this more than almost any other play I can think of need to *be* rather than act. The settings need to be real to them and they will become so to us, and the direction must seem organic and natural.

Stage Presentation

This play poses a number of problems for any production with its swift changes of location and specific requirements - e.g. for a tree or barn - and I have seen many attempted solutions. Yours was ingenious and worked well within the framework of your production. The tree that revolved and folded out to make the barn was clever and well executed, I liked the box down left that was used as an additional level as well as providing the necessary smoke for the fire.

The size of the Rhoda McGaw stage works rather against the intimacy of the approach and I suspect this particular set worked even more effectively on a smaller space.

The lighting plot was ambitious and well considered with the cyclorama used to great effect - gold, yellow, green and blue all providing different mood effects. There was one hiccup with a scene completely in the dark but I understand that was down to the board.

Costumes were uniformly excellent, had the right period feel and suited the individual characters. The detail of Raymond's cowboy outfit, and Donald Duck's grimy Khaki shorts, not to mention Audrey's spectacles and Willie's vast shorts were spot on. Great!

Good work from the sound department, gentle dance hall music to begin and apt, well judged effects throughout. The only false note was the

squeaky wheel effect, which clearly came from the side of the stage rather than the splendid pram.

Direction

In my view it is essential that the audience is pitched immediately into the hurly burly of the world inhabited by these wartime children playing and teasing, brawling and pretending as the world war rages not too far away.

You succeeded magnificently from the first moments as Willie roared onto the scene in full Spitfire mode before enacting a splendid demise as the plane spluttered and spiralled to the ground. The merest pause and Peter literally dropped into the action from his hiding place in the tree, signalling a spirited encapsulation of the friendship and rivalry as they bantered, bickered and battled. A fine opening to the play, so spirited was the well choreographed fight that I feared for your safety at one point.

I felt you captured just the right spirit the seven year old world that is so often missing from productions of this play.

The lighting change to signal a shift of mood, pace and tone as you switched in an instant from manic laughter to "Shut thy chops Willie" was very well done but you didn't dwell on it too long - moving swiftly to the next sequence.

The pacing of the first third of the play was so well managed by turns breathless and breathtaking. I loved the way in which we were swept along with the momentum of the story and new characters were introduced efficiently with just the right weight and emphasis.

There was a problem with the first scene featuring Angela and Audrey which was severely underlit - a situation not helped by the fact that Angela kept straying out of the light. I know it is difficult but you must adapt to the circumstances of the moment and stay in the light even if it means changing a move.

However the dynamic between the two characters was nicely achieved and the "playing nurse scene" efficiently conveyed much of what we needed to know about the eternal victim Donald Duck.

The use of the stage was impressive. Though I have an inkling you are not really accustomed to playing in such a large space you took full advantage of the depth to give us some excellent groupings and fine stage pictures. Scene 10 was a good example. You rightly kept a distance between the boys downstage and the girls upstage with the pram.

While I absolutely loved the business of the squirrel flying out of the tree I would have liked to have seen more violence in its death - this is a real "Lord of the Flies" moment as the boys revert to mob rule and savagery, The more violent you can make this sequence the more poignant their regret will be.

The standing on head sequence was staged beautifully and played with great brio - just be careful not to lose the all important dialogue here - you still have to get the words over in the midst of the action otherwise the audience will be confused about what has happened. Great change of mood for the showdown between John and Peter and their fight.

You captured the darkening atmosphere of the final third of the play very well indeed, using the contrasting moods of the group boys and the lone Donald. The "eyetie" scene provides a bit of knockabout before

things get really serious and was given full measure here. I admired the tight grouping as kids planned their raid to retrieve the stranded Dinah and the bold way you handled the pretend capture.

The flow of the last few scenes of the play is notoriously tricky to get right and it didn't quite work as it might in this production.

Your solution to the barn fire was ingenious and well realised - but here and on a few other occasions I felt the size of the stage didn't help the moving about of scenery that had to be done. It is a relatively minor point but ideally you should consider this as you plan for the festival - having said that the scene itself was suitably chilling.

The following blackout went on for much too long - there certainly does need to be a pause but you need to have a rethink on its length. The short scene that follows is so poignant as the kids rationalise their actions and abdicate responsibility and it was sensitively played here.

Acting

Willie

I loved this performance from the opening moments impersonating the stricken aeroplane to the anguish of the play's final moments. Your loose limbs were splendidly uncoordinated and you used your mobile features to produce some memorable facial expressions without every straying over the top, your delivery of the terrible coughing/coffin play on words was fabulous. Well done.

Peter

This consistently high octane performance was very impressive. I enjoyed the unrestrained laughter in the early sequences and the volatile energy

you brought to the role. You conveyed the casual cruelty of the character most effectively as he baited Donald Duck about his Dad.

John

John is the natural leader of the group and you brought out his innate decency. The fight with Peter was very well choreographed and performed with real gusto. The timing of the sequence before you go "over the top" with Peter was great, particularly the memorable delivery of "Good job you've got us".

Raymond

The nervous, sensitive, stuttering Raymond is a tricky role but I felt you got the judgement of the impediment about right, ensuring the stammer didn't obscure the text too much.

Angela

By turns coquettish, petulant and needy, this Angela was certainly doing all she could to become the centre of attention and no one was ever in doubt regarding her high opinion of herself. Your tantrum was impressively controlled. Well done.

Audrey

You captured the inner core of cruelty at the heart of the character. I loved the delight you took in the pain inflicted on poor Donald during the nurse-playing scene and the slyness you showed us in your dealings with Angela.

Donald Duck

The damaged Donald is one of the key tragic figures of twentieth century theatre in my view, and you portrayed his vulnerability with great skill. He

is very much the outsider and your underplaying was expertly judged throughout. You really came into your own in the fire sequences towards the end of the play. Very well done.

Conclusion

I have seen this play performed on many occasions but rarely have I seen it done with such fine judgement in terms of the portrayal of the seven year old children at the heart of the piece.

The performances were of a uniformly high quality and the teamwork first class.

It was played with terrific pace, giving the play a thrilling momentum, and the director and cast managed the many changes of mood with great skill.

The scenic devices that made the climactic scenes of the play work so well were clever and well thought out and I suspect will work even more effectively on a smaller stage. The very final sequence needs another look - it didn't quite work here - but it was a rare false note in an otherwise highly enjoyable production.

Paul Fowler

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