

Lost in Yonkers

Review by Nan Lincoln November 21, 2001

Last weekend the Grand Auditorium and The New Surry Theater joined forces to produce Neil Simon's *Lost In Yonkers*. It has to have been one of the finest dramatic events ever performed on The Grand stage - or any area stage, for that matter - amateur or professional.

This is saying a lot, actually. There has been no dearth of good theatrical entertainment from a number of local and visiting summer troupes.

But this performance, directed and produced by Bill Raiten and his team from The New Surry Theater, had absolutely everything one looks for in a great theater experience - be it on Broadway or a small, regional stage, i.e., great material, acting, stagecraft and technical support.

Oh, but let's set the stage, first.

Because it is this set, fully in view as the audience enters, that gives us the first powerful premonition that something quite wonderful is about to occur. Designed, constructed and dressed by Gerry Newman, Joe Lewis and Elena Bourakovsky, you couldn't get a more authentic-looking World War II-era, New York apartment without Mr. Wells' time machine.

Smart to keep those curtains open, giving the early arriving audience a chance to explore with their eyes the nooks and crannies before it got cluttered up with people and action.

Here's what we saw: a spacious living room with dark walnut wainscoting and trim, ochre wallpaper with a reddish-brown William Morris-like floral design, broken by windows swagged in almost-elegant drapery, several doorways and, up center stage, a small dining room divided from the main room by a frame of rippled, stained-glass panes. It's obviously too far upstage for there to be any real play action going on in this dining room. It is just there - with its tulip glass chandelier, lace-covered dining table, and I'm pretty sure a mahogany buffet at the back - for people to move through to get to the kitchen and back. A sensible set designer could have eliminated it altogether. But by including it in his design, Mr. Newman tells us much about the time, the place and the woman, Grandma Kurnitz, who rules this well-ordered roost that is both as intimate and as distant as an old, hand-tinted sepia-tone photograph.

The big, overstuffed couch in the living room with its prim antimacassars, Grandma's throne-like chair and little footstool, the big, stolid console radio (an Atwater maybe), the small, round luncheon table set, the heavy mantel clock, the table and floor lamps, the photographs on the side tables, the art on the wall all say: Welcome to Yonkers, 1941. There isn't a single prop that looks out of place, date or synch on this set. And there are just enough of them to indicate that people live here, but not enough cozy clutter to suggest that their lives are happy ones.

Enter Eddie Kurnitz (Steve Shaffer) and his two boys, Jay (Brendan Murray) and Arty (Julian Chapman). The father is diffident, nervous, overwhelmed and alternately fussy then hushed by the oppressive memories of his childhood home. The boys are fidgety, querulous and, uh-oh, irreverent of their dreaded grandmother's things and space.

Masters Murray and Chapman, ages about 13 and 11, are an absolute marvel here. They play their characters with impressive depth - ranging from a couple of smart-mouth wiseacres to deeply anguished youngsters who have just lost their mother to cancer and are about to be abandoned by their desperate father in this child-unfriendly place. I don't know that I've ever heard child stage actors with better diction or projection. The only words I might have lost were buried somewhere in the "Aurghh guh-ruggghh!" after young Arty downs his grandmother's medicinal mustard soup, and fakes a near-death experience.

Now, remember this is a Neil Simon play, and he's a very funny guy - so these kids are funny, too - when they're not being heart-wrenchingly sad. The same can be said of every character in this play, actually - even the dreaded Grandma Kurnitz. Suffice it say there are lots of laughs written into the script, and this cast knows exactly where to find them.

Speaking of which, now comes Bella (Cindy Robbins) galloping up the apartment stairs to embrace her two seldom-seen nephews. Her mind muddled in infancy by scarlet fever, Bella, with her flouncy pastel dresses and excited outbursts of joy, excitement or anger, careens through the stuffy, settled ambience of the apartment she shares with her mother like a fractious puppy.

You just fall in love with her the moment she bursts through the apartment door, flustering her nephews with her irrepressible hugs, kisses and eagerness to please. And then, without losing any of those child-like qualities, during the course of the play, Ms. Robbins very gradually teaches us that there is a lot more to Bella than we first assume. When she finally reveals the unexpected depth of her feelings, passions, dreams and wisdom to her mother she has all of us spellbound with admiration and not just a few of us sobbing.

How could such a force of pure goodness not bend the rigid will of Grandma Kurnitz (Dindy Royster), we agonize.

It is to Ms. Royster's credit that we feel no guarantee such a satisfying thing is going to happen, and even more to her credit that we desperately want it to. Her Grandma is indeed a mean old woman, stiff (but never wooden), intractable, unapproachable, thoroughly unpleasant. Having lost two of her six children in childhood, and having suffered through a harrowing childhood of her own in anti-Semitic Germany, her only goal for herself and her remaining children is survival. She has left no room for tenderness or affection in this stern regime, and is, in turn, completely unlovable herself. But oh, occasionally, Ms. Royster lets us see these little glimmers of fire - like cracks in a cast-iron stove - that draw us toward her to see if we can detect a breath of warmth.

Her other surviving children, Gert (Bonnie Myers) and Louie (Jim Pendergist) apparently never found that warmth. Gert has been so terrorized by her mother that she can not speak in her mother's house without gulping for breath. Ms. Myers is wonderful in this small role. She allows us to laugh at her wheezing speech and yet imbues Gert with incredible dignity.

As for Louie, the cold nest his mother raised him in worked. He is a survivor. So what if he does it as a gangster. In the program notes it says that this is Mr. Pendergist's first stage role. Unbelievable. He inhabits Louie in every possible way with his booming, boastful voice, his bullying swagger and even the way he rolls his shoulders when pulling up his suspenders. He never makes a false move. Hmmm, one has to wonder here if Mr. Pendergist might really be a gangster.

In fact, there isn't a moment when we don't believe in anything these people do or say. Unless he has some kind of magic fairy acting dust, the only explanation for such evolved acting is that director Mr. Raiten has given his students the tools to believe it themselves.

And then, of course, Elena Bourakovsky dresses them like themselves. As meticulous with detail in costuming as she was in dressing the stage, the outfits she has created for these characters had to have come straight out their own Yonkers' closets - right down to the Grandma Kurnitz's corsets and Louie's garters.

Another thoroughly professional touch was Noel Dechar's lighting. The overall sepia-tone effect of the set was nicely enhanced by his soft, gold hues, and while there was a lot of switching lamps on and off, he never missed a cue.

OK. Now, for the huge mistake. With a distressing lack of foresight - and to be fair, who knew? - Lost in Yonkers was scheduled for only one weekend. Last Sunday afternoon was the final performance. However, all may not be lost. Apparently, Grand executive director Bob Bahr was so impressed by the production that he is going to try to get the board to hold it over or reprise it. Call 667-5911 to see if he did it and make reservations. If not, call the cavalry.

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