

The View's A Knockout

(by Nan Lincoln, Bar Harbor Times August 4, 2005)

Once again, Bill Raiten's New Surry Theatre has gone out on the cliff edge with a big, potentially dangerous, dramatic vehicle, and, like Evel Knievel on a good day, has managed to soar over the yawning chasm and land safely on the other side.

The vehicle in this case is Arthur Miller's "A View From the Bridge," an intense drama about family and community pulled apart by mistrust, prejudice and misplaced passion, now playing at Ellsworth High School Performing Arts Center.

In the wrong hands the story of Eddie Carbone's journey from admired family patriarch to neighborhood pariah could have been dreadful. If the director and actors missed the moments of humor, the subtle shifts of family dynamics that make the characters in Miller's stunning play so true to life, the whole thing would have plunged into the depths melodrama - but it did not. It all stays aloft from the moment we first spot Eddie (Herb Mitchell) barreling his way down the street after a day laboring on the docks, eager to get home with good news for his wife, Beatrice (Cindy Robbins), and niece, Catherine (Elizabeth Moran), until the final end of Eddie's unreinable odyssey of self-destruction.

If director Mr. Raiten was at the controls of this vehicle, actor Mr. Mitchell is the powerful engine that drives it forward. His performance is compelling as his character transforms from a big-hearted family guy to a manipulator, raging bully, wheedler and finally betrayer of trust and his own principals, and so devastating to watch. But as much as you want to turn away, you can't take your eyes off Mr. Mitchell as he also transforms himself - from an actor into Eddie Carbone.

So meet Eddie, an immensely likeable man, living with his wife and their orphaned 17-year-old niece in a small Brooklyn apartment. At first, all seems right in his little world. He teases his niece with avuncular good humor about her new fancy hair-do, stylishly short skirt and "wavey" walk. He pleases his wife with news that her two cousins from Italy have arrived, and graciously agrees to board them in his home and find them work



The New Surry Theater has launched its first repertory season at Ellsworth High School with "A View From the Bridge." Pictured here from left to right are Tim Pugliese as Marco, Cindy Robbins as Bea, Herb Mitchell as Eddie and Julian Chapman as Rudolpho. PETER TRAVERS PHOTO

although they are illegal aliens. As a son of immigrants, he knows it is the right thing to do. But Eddie is not pleased with the news that young Catherine has been offered a secretarial job at one of the dock offices. While she and Eddie's wife, Beatrice, are thrilled by this first step toward independence, Eddie, it appears, has bigger plans for her. In fact, it soon becomes apparent that encouraging the girl's independence is the furthest thing from his mind. He wants to keep her close to home. While Eddie has convinced himself that his purpose is to groom the girl for a better life than can be found in a small office in Brooklyn, his wife, Bea, intuitively understands that her husband merely wants to keep the lovely young woman, well, close - to him. Ms. Robbins is a marvel here, by the way, managing to convey her desperation about the situation without daring to put a name to it. Not a woman in the audience could have been unmoved by her plight.

Into this tear in the fabric of their family step the two Italian immigrants: Marco (Tim Pugliese), a 30-something husband and father who will be sending wages home to his wife and children; and Rudolpho (Julian Chapman), his handsome kid brother who dreams of becoming an American. At first, I was disconcerted by Rudolpho's rather obviously bleached blond hair. Why would the production's excellent costume designer, Elena Bourakovsky, have chosen this look for him? Well, it soon becomes apparent that Eddie is disturbed by Rudolpho's hair and by everything else about boy, whom he deems to be "just not right" - especially when Rudolpho starts courting his precious Catherine.

Eventually, Eddie's mistrust of Rudolpho's motives and his jealousy climax in a "friendly" little boxing lesson, where Eddie crosses the line, forcing the quiet, diffident Marco to side with his brother; and in a drunken confrontation with the young lovers where a raging Eddie tries to demonstrate to his niece the difference between a "real man" and a boy who is "not right" in the most inappropriate way.

On the sidelines of all this is Mr. Alfieri (Ralph Chapman), a lawyer whom Eddie tries to enlist in his cause, and who seems to be a stand-in for all of us in the audience who long to cry "Whoa!" before Eddie's obsession turns a family crisis into a tragedy.

While Mr. Mitchell and Ms. Robbins are the strong center of this acting ensemble, their supporting cast also helps lift this production above the usual plane of amateur theater. Teenager Miss Moran, as Catherine, has the formidable task of standing her ground not only with the character of Uncle Eddie, but against the powerful presence of Mr. Mitchell. For the most part she holds up remarkably well, convincingly accomplishing a transition from flirty little girl to conflicted young woman. But I recall in her previous NST performance as the frightened Mary in last summer's "The Crucible," she tended to pluck at her clothes and wring her hands a good deal. While this was an appropriate physical mannerism for Mary and not totally wrong for Catherine, it's beginning to look like a nervous tick she needs to control. As Rudolpho, Mr. Chapman is a nice match for Catherine, and plays the part in a way that never makes it clear if he is or is not "right." As Marco, Mr. Pugliese is a smoldering presence - a small Sicilian volcano ready to explode when the ground beneath him is shaken too violently. Both men do an admirable, sustained job with a subtle Italian accent that comes nowhere near the "that's-a one-a, spicy-a meat-a-ball-a" stereotype. Could have done without Marco's skid row stubble, but

I think he's growing a beard for his role in the next NST play, "House of Blue Leaves."

And Ralph Chapman, who has essentially played the same role in every play I've seen him in - the good, rational man who finds himself powerless to change a disastrous course of events - is, once again, so darn likeable as Alfieri that one forgives a certain physical awkwardness on stage and the occasional halting dialogue.

Gerry Newman's set is, as ever, a wonder of ingenuity. He has managed to create the interior of Eddie's apartment, the street and street corner outside, an alleyway to the side of apartment building, and Mr. Alfieri's office with a few "suspension" panels and levels. Ms. Bourakovsky has dressed both the set and her actors so thoughtfully that everything, including the china in the cabinets and the age spots on the wallpaper, either looks authentic or actually is the real deal - the old pay phone on the corner even sounded perfect! When we hear that Rudolpho has been splurging his money on shoes, the next time we see him he is indeed sporting a fancy new pair of brown wingtips. In fact, there is nothing on that stage or on the actors that for the tiniest moment jars the audience out of the moment with some minor physical incongruity. This sort of attention to detail is a hallmark of New Surry Theatre productions, and the powers that be at the Grand Auditorium, where NST has substantially filled the house for its last three or four seasons, ought to pay attention to that before they send Mr. Raiten looking for another venue for his productions, as they did this year.

As it is, there isn't a bad seat in the house at Ellsworth High School's handsome performing arts center where "A View from the Bridge" will be performed again tonight, Aug. 4, and Aug. 5 and 6. All performances will be at 7:30 p.m. The run of "View" will be immediately followed by the dark comedy, "House of Blue Leaves," with many of the same cast members.

Tickets are \$15 general admission; \$12 for seniors and for students under age 18. Call 374-5556. A special subscription rate is being offered for both shows. One ticket for each is \$25 general, \$20 for seniors and students. For further information, visit www.newsurrytheatre.org or call 374-5057.