

10-9-1978

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Recommended Citation

Lazenby, Walter, "Milkwood' Rhythm of Moods" (1978). *Walter Lazenby Reviews*. 41.
http://thekeep.eiu.edu/lazenby_reviews/41

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'Milk Wood' Rhythm of Moods

Monday
9 Oct '78

By Walter Lazenby

Contrary to what one hears again and again, the play's not always the thing, nor should it be.

Take, for example, the current production — current until tonight's final performance — of Dylan Thomas's "Under Milk Wood" in Eastern's Fine Arts Playroom.

Though billed Interpreter's Theatre, it uses props and costumes, a rather elaborate set, and much stage movement to illustrate the poet's words.

In other words, Director Donna Rice Shehorn's approach emphasizes the "play" in the sub-title rather than the prescription "for voices."

Watching one patron across the arena-style acting space, who repeatedly closed her eyes as if to concentrate on the words, I wondered how the production might have been different if it had been shaped by Thornton Wilder's dictum that all one needs for dramatic interest is "a platform and a passion or two."

A Review

I wanted to close my eyes too — not that the actors aren't attractive, not that the costumes don't help them create character — because the often formula-rized actions detracted from the word magic.

And I seldom felt I had leisure to relish Thomas's piled-up descriptions, striking images, twists in familiar phrases ("to be your awful wedded wife"), so overly-smooth was the pace of delivery in many instances.

The script is not that of a tightly structured dramatic narrative; instead it flows from vignette or situation to vignette, depicting as a whole life in a

small Welsh fishing village.

Its movement constitutes a rhythm of moods: from the poignancy of an aged sea captain's regrets and memories, to the sharpness of a young romantic longing for a girl appropriately named Gossmaer, to the buoyancy of youngsters discovering sexual awakening, to the disillusionment and despair and malice of a man who sits across the table from his wife and revels in a vision of her dying of poison, with steam hissing out of her navel! Very interesting stuff.

There are quick-sketches of a fanatical organist whose wife is a "a martyr to music," a gossiping postman who reads all mail, the village's scarlet woman, a butcher who probably mixes stray animal parts into his sausages, a widow whose germ-consciousness probably brought on the deaths of her two husbands, etc.

I thought the cast's voices well chosen

for contrast and blending — none of them "sweet as a razor" — but not often heavily enough relied on to produce these portraits, without aid of extraneous motion. Ironically, some passages that came over a backstage microphone were easily as effective as passages acted out.

Occasionally Gary Shrader's expressiveness and sense of rhythm carried a scene; certainly Donna Parrone's understated duologue with Captain Cat in one of his reverie seemed electrically charged, and her song about Tom, Dick, Harry, but especially Willy was a highlight.

Kathy Lampen was at her best as the most forward of a group of schoolgirls (Is she the one who wants "to sin till I blow up?") and Julie Woosley reached her peak as the germ-fanatic widow. (Most actors had quadruple roles, at least.)

And I particularly enjoyed the undertones of Robert Shumacher's song, "Come Sweep my Chimbley."