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'Milk Wood' Rhythm of Moods

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 Shelhorn'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."

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 formulaized 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-sketched pictures of a fanatical organist whose wife is a "a martyr to music," a gossipy 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 reveries 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."