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CURTAIN RAISERS

Every Golden Age Needs a Sage



Jenny Seastone Stern with Ben Williams ALEX FABOZZI

By **LIZZIE SIMON**

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Each week in Curtain Raisers, we invite a local theater artist to attend a show of his or her choosing and discuss the results. On Tuesday, playwright Mac Wellman opted to see "Grimly Handsome," written and directed by Julia Jarcho, at Incubator Arts in the East Village. Mr. Wellman's plays include "Sincerity Forever," "Antigone" (with Big Dance Theater) and "1965 UU." He won an Obie award in 2003 for lifetime achievement and is currently a distinguished professor at Brooklyn College.

Few contemporary playwrights have exerted more influence on this generation of theater-makers than Mac Wellman, the author of more than 40 plays since the 1970s. The list of local performers, playwrights and directors who can trace their own work back to his conceptual complexities and musicality of language is long. It includes Ms. Jarcho, who both studied with him and wrote about his plays in her Ph.D. dissertation.



It wasn't a surprise, then, that Mr. Wellman had special insight into "Grimly

Ms. Stern with Mr. Williams and Pete Simpson. The three actors play multiple roles. *ALEX FABOZZI*

Handsome," a play that follows a couple of Christmas tree sellers (Pete Simpson and Ben Williams) who drug, assault and murder one of their customers (Jenny Seastone Stern). They are pursued by a couple of buddy cops (again, Messrs. Simpson and Williams)—one of whom is sleeping with the other's wife (again, Ms. Seastone Stern)—and the play ends with three rat-like animals (yes, the same trio of actors) eating the desiccated bones of the murder victim.

Ms. Jarcho zig-zags between straightforward storytelling and illogical playfulness in her use of dialogue, actors' gestures, and the structure inherent in the murder-mystery genre. The effect is enhanced by the fact that three performers play all the roles without it always being clear which role they're playing. The experience is one of struggling to get a toe hold and then suddenly finding yourself on a different mountain.

"The rules change," Mr. Wellman said. "The effect it has on me was to keep me in the moment. You don't get ahead of this kind of play."

He acknowledged that "Grimly" was sometimes difficult to follow ("This would



Playwright Mac Wellman attended a performance of Julia Jarcho's 'Grimly Handsome' at Incubator Arts in the East Village. *LIZZIE SIMON/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

be baffling for a lot of American audiences”), and he conceded that it hadn’t provoked much of an emotional response. But that wasn’t the aim.

“She’s more interested in something else,” Mr. Wellman said. “Waking you up. It’s not about plot. It’s about the act of storytelling.”

Ms. Jarcho, he explained, works in the tradition of Menippean satire, in which the artist constructs a play in a way that forces the audience to look critically at itself and at its assumptions about the art form. “Menippean satire is dealing with the whole analysis of what theater is,” he said. “Jarcho’s doing it: You think you know what a story is? You think you know what a character is?”

The style is a through line, he said, connecting many critically acclaimed contemporary theater makers in New York—a population that seems to be multiplying like Gremlins recently.

“I do think there are more great playwrights than ever before,” he said. “And I don’t know why.”

Most members of this community would give at least partial credit to Mr. Wellman. In his stints at Brown University, NYU and Brooklyn College, his students have included Annie Baker, Sarah Ruhl, Young Jean Lee, Thomas Bradshaw, Rinne Groff, Anne Washburn, Tina Satter, Sibyl Kempson, Erin Courtney and Kristen Kosmas—a veritable who’s-who of off-Broadway creators.

"I introduce them very well to each other and once I do that they create their own community," he said. "They provoke each other."

In Ms. Washburn's "The Internationalist" and Ms. Kempson's "Ich, Kurbisgeist," the playwrights embedded invented languages—ones the audience could follow only partially. Ms. Lee's "Untitled Feminist Play" was a wordless and often shocking nude "play" that explored femininity and left many audience members with an expanded sense of what a show is and what a female body is. Mr. Bradshaw's "Burning" used carefree acts of what we think of as sexual violence to implicate the audience for its taboo pleasures. None of these plays resemble the others except in their challenging the viewer to consider "What is theater?" and "Who am I?"

Mr. Wellman dismissed the idea that he'd specifically taught these playwrights Menippean satire. "I don't tell them to do it," he said. "But when I see it, I talk about it. And then I began to see it all over the place."

Anyway, history is full of such writers. Menippean satire is found in the Greeks, he said, in Shakespeare, in Chekhov. "Hamlet," for one, includes passages wherein Shakespeare unstitches his own narrative in a way that satirizes both his playwriting and the act of going to a play.

The style diverges sharply from the character realism of 20th-century icons like Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Recently, though, some of Mr. Wellman's former students have begun to break into similar rarified air, with productions at Playwrights Horizons, the Public and the New Group, among others.

"There's something very important about what they're doing," he said. "You've got this huge liberal audience in New York who is so pleased with itself. Society is so full of know-it-alls telling us what to think."

Perhaps that helps explain why New York might be in the midst of a new Golden Age of theater. Mr. Wellman saw at least a dozen theater makers in the audience at Ms. Jarcho's show. "Whether they liked it or not, it's going to do something to them," he said. "You get a scene like this and it's contagious. Talent is contagious. It's exciting for me to see it happening."