

Kenneth Odle

Professor Siebers

English 1100

21 October 2008

Moon Over Buffalo: A Review in Three Parts

There's a lot to love about amateur theatre: it's cheap (or free), the production values can be surprisingly good, it's cheap, the acting is even and often quite good, it's cheap, it's far more entertaining than most movies you'll pay far more to see, and it's cheap. It's also easy on the wallet.

You can expect all this and more from Western Michigan University's recent Theatre Department production of Ken Ludwig's *Moon Over Buffalo*. There are two things to say about this performance: it was better in some ways, and worse in some ways, than I thought it would be. The easy way to explain this is that when we are seeing a play we are not familiar with, our expectations are formed by the play's promotion, reviews we may have seen, and word of mouth from people who have seen this performance, or another of the same play. That's accurate and fair as far as it goes, but we run into difficulties when we're familiar with the play, either through having seen other performances, or having read the script ahead of time. What forms our expectations then?

Largely, our expectations come from the script and whatever background information we bring to it. So let's take a few minutes to look at the script itself.

The play is pure farce, beginning to end. But while farce is good in small doses, it doesn't have the power to entertain modern audiences for two hours (especially when that farce concerns something as esoteric as the theatre and those who work in it), which is why there is a dearth of

such classics as “The Three Stooges” or “Abbott and Costello,” even on the millions of channels available through satellite. Ludwig knows this, and so he infuses a lot of satire into his play. As a farce, the play works for a while; as satire, it’s successful from beginning to end.

So where is it farce, and where is it satire? The farce comes largely from a single character, that of George Hay, whose days in live theatre are quickly coming to an end. He and his actress wife, Charlotte Hay, are despondent about this; they are convinced that television will be the death of their careers (in much the same way that cassettes spelled the end for vinyl albums, and CD’s spelled the end for cassettes). Charlotte’s response is to take up with a non-theatre friend, the couple’s wealthy lawyer, Richard. While a feminist critic may not much care for Charlotte’s approach, she is at least doing something, as opposed to George, whose approach is more that of an armadillo: curl up into a protective shell (with glass in hand) and hope for the best.

Curling up like an armadillo may not seem like farce, but the farce comes from his approach to acting: he prefers the energetic and dramatic roles, like *Cyrano*, rather than the more laconic and debonair ones to be found in Noel Coward’s *Private Lives*. He would rather jump, shout, and swing a sword than express emotion through a subtly raised eyebrow—which wouldn’t carry much beyond the second row, anyway.

Satire, however, is where Ludwig really shines. He shows us several different types of satire largely through the person of a single character, and it is the strength of Ludwig’s writing that these characters are prevented from becoming caricatures. Ludwig does this by exploring each character’s motivation. Rosalind is disappointed by her parent’s peripatetic lifestyles, but underneath, we sense her frustration at what seems to be a meaningless (and given Ludwig’s interpretation of television, an easily believable) view of performance, one which is lacking in

substance. Paul, her former beau and now the stage manager of the Hay's troupe, is frustrated by the fact his dedication and devotion to said troupe has failed to win her heart. Though Rosalind and Paul are not the main characters, it is through them that Ludwig builds upon the foundation of the main characters, Charlotte and George.

Likewise, Eileen is the typical stage mother, but unlike the stage mothers of our day, she believes George will fail, but if he fails, better that he fail with a proper pair of trousers than without. She repairs his trousers over and over again, despite how many times they are torn apart backstage—not without complaint, mind you, but such complaints are part of her character.

While we are speaking of trousers, there is a minor point I want to mention. It may seem a minor point to many; a petty, pedantic, and punctilious point, but I have to make it nonetheless: when George's trousers rip, there is no ripping sound.

A minor point, you say. We can *imagine* the ripping sound. I certainly did. But on such basic points, perhaps we should expect at least that much of the performance, and perhaps—just perhaps—a bit more.

So let's talk about the performance. Watching it, I was constantly thinking, *how would I stage this play?* With some reflection, I realized I wouldn't change a thing at all. That's not to say I felt the staging was entirely believable—merely that given my prior experience with the theatre, I would *have* to make different choices. But this performance was staged in the Gilmore Theatre Complex, a very impressive arena, and a few words of which deserve mention here.

The Gilmore Complex is an impressive facility; one in which the taxpayer's dollars have been well spent. No doubt any aspiring actor, or mere stage lackey, would give their eye-teeth to cut the rest of their teeth on it. Yet, it is only a set, a place to perform a play, and the success or failure of a performance does not depend so much on *where* it is staged, but *how* it is staged.

In some ways, it almost too grand a stage for amateur actors—the temptation to substitute style for substance must be great, yet these young actors don't fail in their task at all. They have the strength to resist this temptation. And yet, like actors in a third-grade play, they have their shortcomings.

You can relax here—it's neither my desire nor my inclination to beat amateur actors over their heads with said shortcomings, whether they be college drama majors or third-graders tip-toeing through *Hansel and Gretel*. I'll reserve such diatribes for those working in the movies, where even if you're working for scale, you should at least *try* to earn your paycheck.

Still, we are talking about amateur performances, and something must be said about that. Whether it's a third-grader seeking the approval of his parents or teacher, or a tenth-grader seeking the approval of his peers, or a college student seeking the approval of his director or professor (who may be one and the same), we are still talking about honest, earnest performances. (How do we know they are earnest? Would you expose yourself to such possible ridicule if you weren't honest?) In such earnestness, we often find our greatness strengths.

So let's talk about the strengths of these actors. The two strongest performances, at least at first glance, are by Tori Blade, who plays Rosalind, and Brooks Applegate, who plays Paul. Such is the strength of their acting that it is possible to forget they are acting at all; rather, they seem as if they were transported here from some 1950's acting troupe, with their knowledge and attitudes of the stage intact. Part of their strength is merely costume (Tori Blade looks as if she could have stepped whole from a filming of *I Love Lucy*), but the greater part is craft.

Which is not to say that the other actors in this play don't have the craft. Perhaps they are method actors, and simply lack the relevant experiences. I think this is so, and given that they are barely old enough to buy their own beer, it is a stretch to ask them to imagine themselves as

someone who is simply thin and stretched and worn out by life. What may appear on Broadway as miscasting may seem here as stilted acting, but none of these characters feel stilted. Given that this is an amateur college performance, what we are seeing is not miscasting as much as over-casting, as if the actors are being asked to inhabit a skin which isn't theirs, as if they were lizards which have just shed their skins and aren't used to this new size and shape, this new identity.

The best example of this is in the character of George, played by Louis Sallan. I felt for him, watching him struggling through this play. To play someone who is so old and as yet so young is quite a stretch, and my first impression was that he was merely overacting. But George *is* an over-actor, and he had to be. In an age where everything is recorded digitally and can be changed (I won't say *corrected*) at the click of a mouse, George has to make an impression and he makes it by being loud, bellicose, and often vulgar, whether on-stage or off; for George this distinction no longer exists, or is a very blurry one. Given this, Sallan does an adequate job, but one feels that this is merely another role, that he has never really felt the desperation George must be feeling. Still, he does the best he can with it, and within the confines of amateur, college, theatre, he does a fairly good job of it.

That is the telling phrase—*the confines of amateur, college theatre*. We are not facing a well-financed Hollywood production here. Rather, what we are looking at is closer to drama as the Greeks knew it, the strengths of the Gilmore Complex notwithstanding. It is not the flash and bang that grabs us (although in a poor performance, that may be all we remember), but the sum of the performance's parts, the little bits that seem inconsequential at first but add up to much more than we could have expected at the beginning.

So, is there a point to this whole thing? Is there a reason, beyond any tangible one, that we should have given up five dollars and two hours of our lives for? There is, but we have to

look at ourselves much more than at the play for an answer.

In the end, we have to ask ourselves only two questions: first, did we like the play, and second, does it really matter why or why not? These are important questions, and as we step more thoroughly into a media-rich and media-crazed world, they become more difficult to answer. Once upon a time, the most, the very most, we could hope for was that our favorite movie might show up late some night on a channel that we barely received, and had to make out the action and dialogue through a haze of static. Now we can see anything we want anytime we want, and we don't even need television to do it. We can watch movies on DVD's, on our laptops, even on our iPod's, and when Hollywood's version of Huxley's *soma* fails to soothe us, we can switch to the internet, enter a few key words into YouTube, and find our drug of choice. But such choices often overwhelm us, whether we realize it or not, and like a starving person who suddenly finds himself at the head of the line at the buffet, we are so overwhelmed by what we are presented that we really aren't able to make judgments at all, and fill our plate to overflowing with a little bit of everything, without any regard for quality or our own tastes.

In a way, George and Charlotte Hay are right to fear television, and its many silicon-based descendents. In a world filled with media, if something doesn't satisfy in the first few minutes (or seconds), we can easily switch to something more satisfying, or something easier, which in today's world are largely the same. Just as too many choices at the buffet overwhelm our taste buds and make it hard for us to distinguish the truly great from the truly bland, so too, are we unable to determine that which entertains us from that which merely occupies us. In that regard, *Moon Over Buffalo* really succeeds—by telling us to push ourselves away from the media buffet and start to make some real choices for ourselves.

Works Cited:

Ludwig, Ken. *Moon Over Buffalo*. New York: Samuel French, 1996.

Moon Over Buffalo. By Ken Ludwig. Dir. D. Terry Williams. Laura V. Shaw Theatre, Western Michigan University, Kalamazoo. 10 October 2008.