

Letters of Endorsement

When I went to see the Yale Drama School production of “Three Children”, I was not expecting anything. I knew it was an Asian play, but since I was not familiar with Eastern theater this did not mean much to me anyway.

The house lights came down, the stage lights went up, revealing a bare stage and three actors in street clothes. Nothing so far was very different from any of the school’s “collaborative workshop projects” (a pompous translation of “zero budget”), except for the strange intensity that emanated from those three bodies, and how it immediately focused the audience’s attention.

Then the show started and immediately a unique sense of rhythm swept the stage. This was the story of a horse-ride in some forest which could have been anywhere, undertaken by three children who could have been any children. The first words of the play, with their tranquil and haunting poetry, conjured up the forest on stage better than any set piece or lighting gobo could have done. Later in the play, a barefoot actor cries out about shoes that hurt, and one never questions the fact that there were actually no shoes to be seen. To the stage designer that I am, this was thrilling.

The principle was carried on throughout the course of the play, which takes its audience from place to place, according to the various little fables along the narrative path. The actors, like the stage, are versatile, and shift from one character to the other in as much time as it takes to clasp one’s hands. All reality is contained in the text as it is spoken, sometimes whispered, sometimes bellowed, and in the actors’ movement. It is a world where a dance-like movement of the leg evokes a horse on stage.

As the ride progressed, and the children told their immemorial stories of wayward places and people, not once did my attention flicker. The minimalist style of the production, with its code of recurrent gestures and phrases, its closely watched rhythm and sustained energy, seemed to be the only way to meet the epic scale of the text. As I was carried through the different times and places conveyed by the narrative vignettes, I was also witnessing the physical and emotional adventure of these growing children as they went from innocence to violence, from sadness to bliss. By the end of the ride, the children - emotionally bruised and at war with each other - discover the inconsistency of the Graal they have been seeking, and reconcile over their shared disappointment. I felt both the exhilaration and the exhaustion that travels bring one. This ending came as a moment of pure magic unveiling some simple and undeniable truth about life. This was something I had been wanting to find for a long time, something I had been wanting theater to reveal: the quest is more meaningful than the goal.

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