Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Shawn's Evening Explores the Banality of Evil

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 15th, 2017

As you enter the Romulus Linney Courtyard Theatre at the Pershing Square Signature Center for Wallace Shawn's new play *Evening at the Talk House*, you're greeted by a familiar-looking lady dressed in the traditional white shirt and black pants of a waitron. "Would you like a sweet or some sparkling water?" she asks. It takes a minute to realize this is Jill Eikenberry, best known for *LA Law*. Wait, isn't that the still-boyish Matthew Broderick wandering around Derek McLane's cosy clubhouse set? And the squeaking voice of the Yoda-like playwright himself, also a cast member, can be heard chatting with the audience. From this relaxed and inviting opening, you might think you'll be experiencing a nice, warm night with familiar faces from stage and screen delivering cute career anecdotes. But, you're in for a surprise.

Matthew Broderick and Wallace Shawn in *Evening at the Talk House*.
Credit: Monique Carboni

As in his previous works *The Fever, The Designated Mourner,* and *Aunt Dan and Lemon,* Shawn has chosen a easy, comfortable milieu to examine the banality of evil. At first the bonhomie of the pre-show carries into the opening moments of the play in Scott Elliott's deceptively laid-back staging. Broderick, in his character of Robert, a successful playwright, delivers a long monologue explaining that he and several friends are at the Talk House, a run-down theatre club, to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the production of his best play. There is much praise of the club's snacks and cocktails and friendly chit-chat with actor Tom (jovial Larry Pine), producer Bill (avuncular Michael Tucker, Eikenberry's husband and *LA Law* co-star), wardrobe mistress Annette (caustic Claudia Shear), composer Ted (waspy John Epperson, aka drag creation extraordinaire Lypsinka), and Nellie (Eikenberry) who runs the club along with her sole employee Jane (Annapurna Sriram), a sometime actress.

But it's gradually revealed we're in a dystopian future where theater is dead, soulless TV sitcoms are the dominant cultural offerings, and murder has become a government policy. In fact, several of the group have become part-time assassins to make ends meet since there are so few jobs in the arts. A charming but ruthless figure named Ackerley (a stand-in for Trump?) has risen to power and his dictatorial whims are dismissed as necessary measures to keep the population safe. Shawn plays Dick, an unemployed actor and the lone voice of dissent. He is a pitiful figure in pajamas frequently beaten by his "friends" for speaking out against Ackerley's repressive regime.

Matthew Broderick, Annapurna Sriram, Michael Tucker, and John Epperson in *Evening at the Talk*

House.
Credit: Monique Carboni

This is an intriguing concept but the air of casual acceptance of these horrors is so pervasive, it deadens the impact. Yes, that's Shawn's point—fascism creeps in on little cat feet. But the acting and direction is so mild, the effect is soporific. Excerpts from Robert's supposedly great play are as dry as the rest of the dialogue, so there is no contrast between the golden past the characters long for and their gloomy present. The all-star company has been directed to underplay every word and action, except for Shawn and Sriram. Shawn delivers a moving performance as the pathetic Dick, raging against the dying of the light of art. Sriram is saddled with the difficult task of making Jane, who matter-of-factly discusses poisoning old people and whines about her lack of acting work, sympathetic, but she manages to pull it off. Apart from these two bright spots and Shawn's valid themes of the slow creeping effect of political oppression, it's a pretty dull *Evening* with all talk and little action.

Feb. 16—March 12. The New Group at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue—Fri, 7:30 pm; Sat, 8 pm; Wed, Sat, Sun, 2 pm. Running time: one hour and 40 mins. with no intermission. $75—$100. (212) 279-4200. www.ticketcentral.com.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, February 15th, 2017 at 12:11 pm and is filed under Theatre
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.