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‘Ah, Wilderness!’ Review: Comedy That Passes the No-Budget Test

A stripped-down production of Eugene O’Neill’s only mature full-length comedy shows that the playwright’s work endures.

By Terry Teachout



Peter Calvin Atkinson in ‘Ah, Wilderness!’ PHOTO: MICHAEL ABRAMS

Eugene O’Neill, the dour tragedian of 20th-century American theater, was the least likely of men to have tucked a warmhearted family comedy in between his bleak tales of life at its direst. Yet “Ah, Wilderness!” hit big on Broadway in 1933, was promptly turned into an equally successful movie, and has been a community-theater standby ever since. In addition, it gets done with modest regularity by regional companies that can afford to produce a play that calls

for four sets and a 15-person cast. But it hasn’t been seen on Broadway since Lincoln Center Theater’s 1998 revival, and there haven’t been any off-Broadway stagings since then, either. New York, it seems, has turned its back on “Ah, Wilderness!”

For that reason, I headed downtown last week to catch a production that is being jointly mounted in a black-box performance space by two off-off-Broadway troupes, Blackfriars Repertory Theatre and the Storm Theatre Company. I’ve never seen “Ah, Wilderness!” done on a small scale, and this production, staged by Peter Dobbins on a set that consists of little more than a few nondescript pieces of furniture, definitely qualifies. Given a competent cast, such a presentation will be powerfully indicative of a play’s inherent quality: If it comes off, it’s the real thing.

I’m pleased to report, then, that “Ah, Wilderness!” passes the no-budget test with plenty of spare room. While Mr. Dobbins’s cast is somewhat uneven in quality, most of the actors are quite good, and two of them, Renée Petrofes and Ken Trammell, are exceptional. As for Mr. Dobbins’s staging, it’s as uncomplicated as the décor: no interpretive agendas, no smart trickery, just a straightforward rendering of the play itself, which is allowed to work its quaint magic without benefit of special directorial pleading.

The best thing about “Ah, Wilderness!” is the way in which it mixes sweetness with sorrow. It stands to reason that O’Neill, who subtitled the play “A Comedy of Recollection in Three Acts,” would have been inclined to mix these two strong flavors. “Ah, Wilderness!” is the theatrical equivalent of a reverse image of “Long Day’s Journey Into Night,” the tragedy in which he dwelled at length on the horrific shortcomings of his real-life family. In “Ah, Wilderness!” he chose instead to evoke the imagined shades of the Millers, the family he would have preferred, headed by Nat (Mr. Trammell), the tolerant,

supportive father, and Essie (Lynn Laurence), the kindly mother. In addition, he portrayed himself when young as Richard (Peter Calvin Atkinson), a lovesick innocent who reads George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde on the sly but remains a virgin. Indeed, poor Richard is so idealistic that he actually contrives in the second act to visit a whorehouse without effect, coming home drunk but unspotted.



Sean Cleary, Ted McGuinness, Peter Calvin Atkinson, Renée Petrofes and Heather Olsen
PHOTO: MICHAEL ABRAMS

That's the sweet part. The sorrow comes in the form of Sid (Ted McGuinness), Essie's brother, who has kept Lily (Ms. Petrofes, who is touchingly melancholy), Nat's sister and Sid's longtime girlfriend, on the string for 16 years. It's not that Sid isn't willing to tie the knot, but Lily knows better: He's a ne'er-do-well alcoholic who can't hold down a job, and she won't marry him unless he goes on the wagon. Their

relationship casts a shadow on the other Millers, reminding us of the dark-brown threads of disappointment that run through even the happiest of small-town families.

Like all of O'Neill's full-length plays, this one is discursive, running for two hours and 40 minutes. The playwright's estate, however, now permits theater companies to cut his scripts, and I last saw "Ah, Wilderness!" performed by Florida's Asolo Repertory Theatre in a big-budget revival that was judiciously slimmed down to two hours flat. Mr. Dobbins, by contrast, has opted to give us the complete text, and I think that on balance he's made the right call: "Ah, Wilderness!" profits from unhurried presentation, especially in a light-textured production like this one. It helps that Mr. Trammell is so good: His Nat is the father we all wish we'd had, decent and patient, and he makes us believe that such men exist, or at least did in 1906, the year when "Ah, Wilderness!" takes place.

O'Neill's only mature full-length comedy is overdue for a handsome Broadway revival. In its absence, though, this production makes a convincing case for its old-fashioned virtues. Even if—perhaps especially if—your own family was more like the desperately unhappy Tyrones of "Long Day's Journey" than the mostly contented Millers, I suspect you'll be charmed by "Ah, Wilderness!" Like "Our Town," it takes an essentially hopeful view of American family life, and successfully persuades all but the most cynical viewers that it's more than merely pretty to think so.