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Senior Seminar

15 March 2018

### The Taste of Sunrise Review

On February 28<sup>th</sup> I saw the preview night performance of MTSU's *The Taste of Sunrise* by Suzan Zeder. It is a play that focuses on the struggle on a young deaf boy and his desire to fit in with others set in the 1920's. It chronicles his journey as he loses his father and is sent to learn in a deaf school as well as his time after trying to accept the loss of his father and onset of maturity. It was a wonderfully performed show that evoked several emotions from me and made me think really hard about those with disabilities and how they were (and sometimes still are) treated. I greatly felt that most of the elements in the show really reinforced the themes and that the director and designers really collaborated with each other.

First, I'll speak on the direction. I really felt that the director, Jette Halladay, focused a lot on a few key questions in a very beautiful manner: first, I think that one question that was really evident was how do those that are "different" from the larger community really fit in. It's one the script seems to propose itself with the young, deaf protagonist of Tuck as well as with his eventual guardian, Nell. Neither are considered normal—Nell for her singing and "witchcraft" potions, Tuck for his deafness. Both go through journeys of learning to accept themselves and allowing others to accept them until they are finally content to be together in the end. The director staged many wonderful moments where these characters were alone and very clearly separated and hurting because of it. Sometimes the moments were simply as subtle as Nell

entering left and other characters avoiding her path when leaving the scene. These moments really made me feel for the characters and ask how they were supposed to fit into their worlds.

Another question that I felt was tackled really well was how much of a disability is a disability. There were lots of wonderful moments in the beginning when Tuck and his father would have their talks and it seemed like his disability wasn't a problem at all, but then there were other moments in town, at the facilities, or after Jonah died that Tuck was treated like an issue. I think the director did a beautiful job of staging these moments to show what the show is trying to say: that a disability is only truly an issue when it is treated like one. By having certain characters like doctors upstage of Tuck, the subtle illusion of power is given to the audience—similar to how the father talks had Jonah upstage. But later in the end of the play, Tuck is able to spend more time upstage of Nell, and when he is doing his sign language, she is very accepting of it. This is a wonderful moment created by Dr. Halladay to show that a disability is not the end all be all or normalcy.

I also believe that special recognition must be given to the moment where Jonah died. I felt the staging and general atmosphere of this entire moment was simply beautiful. I cried immensely and felt an overwhelming amount of emotion in this moment. Sadly, the following bit was a bit undermined for me because I truly felt that the show could have used the written in intermission after his death. I think because of this, that was my least favorite moment. I see where it was nice to have the energy to propel us forward and not have to come back into after bathroom breaks and munching on chips, but I really would have liked the time to soak in the beautiful moments of Jonah's death.

Of course, other things besides direction play into a show. Dr. Halladay created the overall vision and themes of a play, but then she had to rely heavily on designers to help support

and create her vision. They created an environment that was very much in line with the play. I felt like all the sad moments were appropriately colored by lighting, nothing ever felt extravagant just for the sake of being extravagant. The play felt very versatile within the unit set and like the director had a good grasp on how to stage things so that one scene felt like a new location in comparison to the next. Sound had beautiful moments of echoing singing, thunderclaps, and musical swells that helped the show carry its message. I felt the Dr. Halladay had a strong vision that she was able to help carry through all the elements of the design. Nothing felt too out of place or damaged by a designer's ego, trademark, etc.

Specifically, I'll speak on scenic. I felt that the scenic design was overall very supportive of the show. The levels and rake really allowed the audience to take in many things at once; characters weren't getting lost behind each other, and I really believed that the levels did wonders for the ancestor characters. Without the rake, I feel like the characters would have gotten lost behind each other frequently and I wouldn't have been able to focus on a character and their ancestor counterpart at the same time. I wasn't particularly happy with the overall color of the scenery though—it felt very orange, and that felt like perhaps hitting the idea of sunrise too much on the nose. It also didn't help the lights which almost by nature of the show need to have a large amount of orange in them. Because of the color, too, I never really felt as if the stage was able to become as cold and unforgiving as I felt it should be in the doctor's scenes where there is little to no love for Tuck. Lastly, I really hated that the tree was not an object of nature. I didn't like the idea of Tuck clinging to a man made pole or object when it was society itself that drove him up there. The idea of him clinging onto something as natural as he ought to be viewed is, in my head, a much stronger vision and more reinforcing for the play in general. Furthermore, I just feel like an actual tree would have served the design and show much better.

Infinitely more lighting opportunities can be created, the idea and visual of leaves falling in certain moments, even a potential transition between the seasons and years in the play could have been displayed with a real tree. It just doesn't make a lot of sense that Tuck would cling to the man-made object of a pole, even if one were to use the argument of Jonah's natural death driving Tuck up there. He as a character thrives more in the outdoors all the way throughout the script. Racing back to the house with the pregnant Maisie, staying out in the tree, the ending words of experiencing the sunrise. The first words spoken in the play are about him feeling wind and other very natural elements. Whether a designer or director choice, I felt that this was a moment where the script analysis of the show was never put into the design.

Finally, there is of course the acting. I genuinely felt that this was one of the best shows I have seen acted at MTSU. I felt that most of the actors had real genuine emotion behind their words and a connection to their character that served the message very well. Only in some members of the ensemble of ancestors did I feel ambivalence or emotional detachment, and even at that these were only moments. I witnessed every character in the show have some moment of real beauty that I could tell Jette had had a hand in. I could also tell that these actors had worked hard at learning to tell stories without their voices for this show, and that was incredibly exciting for me to watch. I loved that each person was so invested in their signing.

Perhaps the most wonderful part of the show for me was that I had never felt so emotional and sympathetic for a character at MTSU as I did for Robbie Ramirez's Tuck. He was absolutely terrific in ways I had never see him be. He truly exemplified the idea of putting emotion into the body and propelling it into the audience. Although he barely made a single noise with his mouth, he was the character with the most to say and I felt more feelings and thoughts behind single movements in his pinky finger than I did when other members of the

ensemble would tell a story or act in a more traditional way. It was truly inspiring to watch him create a character that was capable of being both introspective and funny. Whenever there was a sad thought in Tuck's mind, you could see it all throughout his body. But whenever he was telling a joke, it was as if Robbie's whole body were shaking with energy and excitement. Perhaps his best moment in the entire play was watching him fight with Maizie about wanting to keep the baby and act as a father to it. I watched the character struggle with losing a father and learning how to accept the death of a loved one as well as learning how to live in a life where he felt out of place. I felt like the character had an overall objective of wanting to find his place and I think that Robbie did a wonderful job of searching in many places for that and over many subobjectives. His desire to replace his father by being a father was beautifully acted, his desire to learn to be heard and learning sign was clear and heartfelt, and his seeking a friend in Maizie and eventually Nell was very sweet and enduring to watch. Perhaps the most joyous part of the entire play was watching his complex relationship with the two women in his life (Maizie and Nell) unfold. I felt like he was always actively showing that he was learning about them and from them. Even in his hardest times he showed them respect, but was never afraid to let them know where he stood with them. It felt like watching a real relationship in a voyeuristic way, not like watching character interact in a way that they were written to. The world they created together was a very intimately honest one.

Overall, I felt like the entire team involved with *The Taste of Sunrise* did a very good job at creating a moving, thought-provoking piece of art that tackles growing up, loss, disability, and being caught between what's needed of you and what you want. I loved each and every character as a real person and experienced more emotion than I have in several shows. I truly believe that

Suzan Zeder would have been incredibly proud of the production and the way MTSU theatre told her story.