

Saturday

Dear Ed:

I am afraid we have a dull show. Wherever the fault lies, the show is simply below our standard, and if we attempt to go on this way season after season, this project cannot stand up against TV and swimming pools and craft shops as evening entertainment. Here are a few of the factors that are causing this sense of an unfocused clutter:

1. Stuart, Preacher Sims, Jack Stuart, and Widow Howard are all inadequate. Stuart and his son are simply mis-cast, and Sims is almost immobile, almost inarticulate. Widow Howard is content to be a crude mountain woman without warmth or color. Since these four people carry most of the show, their inadequacy dampens the entire production. (Mary, to cap it off, comes across as a little girl of about 14. It is difficult for her to suffer, or to appear to suffer - she is an innocent kid) The central structure is far too weak.
2. The big violent scenes completely overshadow the basic story line, because less time and thought have been spent on these more quiet scenes that convey the meaning of the play. These "conversational" scenes are not well handled; people stand in static clusters; they deliver lines in a wooden manner; they seem lifeless; the spirit is missing; the play seems merely to mark time until we can get to the big battles, as though fighting dialogue is too much trouble - only violent action is worth using.
3. The "artsy-craftsy" concept of the frontier has come to dominate the play. We go into folk songs and dances time after time without any reason, as though the American frontiersman spent most of his time singing and dancing. The struggle to define freedom is of minor consequence, not nearly enough to justify marching off to Kings Mountain. And, the songs are not theatrically interesting; they are cute. The dances have little pattern or meaning - people just jump and skip and chase each other - somersaults and leap-frog. And shouts and screams.
4. The decisions are not those of 1776 but of 1983: when British or Indians threaten, everyone is ready to jump into battle. The crowd is ready and eager to run to Kings Mountain, not listen to Sims or Stuart, not the least bit concerned that they might die. Life on the frontier was dangerous and difficult, and villagers did not leap into fights when Daniel Boone waved his hand. The basic idea of the play, and of this period of time, is the difficult decisions, the awful challenges men faced, the reality of life and death. What we have here is the current Hollywood-TV approach: kill the bad guys with rifle bullets in the face, then have a dance. It is all too pat and mechanical and shallow.
5. Mackenzie tries to give a sinister laugh throughout the whole play, like the villain in the old melodramas who ties the heroine to the railway tracks and then chuckles as he twists his mustache. You and I have discussed several times that Mackenzie is doing what to a major portion of the colonists was right, defending king and country. He is not intended to be a mean-spirited Simon Legree who delights in pounding little children on the head. He has no personal vendetta against the patriots, any more than a policeman tries to get even with a drunk driver. He is not merely a "mean man." We keep forgetting that the Revolution was a struggle between private British citizens, the Tories and the whigs. Redcoats even under Cornwallis were scant. At Kings Mountain the only uniformed Redcoat was Ferguson. In trying to oversimplify

I think we water down the basic meaning we are trying to convey. Here as elsewhere the play is hastily thrown together with a few violent fights and spectacle scenes to catch the peanut crowd. This is not good enough for a serious and expensive work of art.

6. The costumes have become colorless, ill-fitting. The concept of the Southern Appalachian frontiersman is of a bearded, bear-like, slovenly creature like the Hatfields and McCoys. The beard of Daniel Boone is all wrong, and especially that of Mackenzie - the 18th century was beardless, as witnessed in George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, George III, and the whole list. Living in the mountains, or imitating the late 19th century, does not necessitate a great beard. Daniel Boone, as we know, was smooth-faced, so the beard is a misconception, unless we are trying to emphasize that Boone, North Carolina, is a raw and reckless hideout for bearded muscle-men. Stuart, incidentally, resembles John Travolta with that slicked-down effect. His wig is all wrong.

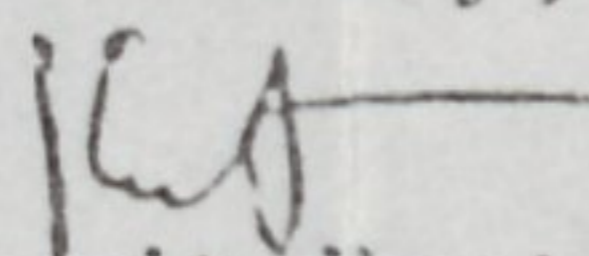
7. There is a strong impression that the handling of this play has been delegated to a staff: much choreography, much folk music and so on, as indicated also by having the staff write sketches in the program.

You tell me repeatedly that we are ~~not~~ doing the script exactly as it was written. This is deceptive. We are speaking most of the words and following most of the scene indications, but the emphasis is out of balance. All of the problems I have mentioned above are not problems of the written script but of the interpretation of the script. It is rather like having the Statue of Liberty do a buck and wing dance: it is the Statue of Liberty all right because we can see the robe and the torch and the spiked headdress, but her ~~meaning~~ meaning has been altered.

I am afraid we have been careless. We know better than to end scene after scene with people merely walking offstage in broad light. We know that in a large panoramic effect we cannot have long waits and pauses while people meditate and try to decide what to say or do. This is the psychological probing of the inner motivations, indoor drama. This is Powder Horn stuff. We know that everything on the stage has to be necessary and justified and needed, or else left out. I don't know why we have Dragging Canoe and Atakulla both. I don't know why DC has a French accent. I don't know why nearly a third of the show has to do with Indians, or nearly a fourth with songs and dances. I don't know why Stuart and Widow Howard are so wooden. The whole first act, up to the big Indian jamboree, is dead.

I feel as though I am lying under a truck with a wheel on my chest - no one listens. Is it possible that people are satisfied with this stuff? Are you? I hope not. But you must stop telling me we are doing the script faithfully. Maybe we need to write a new show, and get this one out of our minds for good. It seems to be stuck in the mud. Could this be one of the reasons we have such pitiful attendance?

Sincerely,

  
Kermit Hunter