

Adjudication of IES's *Tone Clusters* by Joyce Carol Oates

The Warehouse Theatre

Tuesday 29th June 2021

THE PLAY

Apparently, the author of this play is very well known and highly regarded as a multi award-winning writer of numerous novels, short stories and essays in the USA, as well as being an occasional playwright, but I confess that her work was unknown to me. The script is extremely well-suited to the current Covid-19 restrictions in that there are only two characters on stage, and it appears that they are seated throughout in some sort of TV studio. The third character is heard only as the Voice, offstage. What I find remarkable is that IES chose it for performance in the 2019 County Drama Festival, well before the start of the pandemic – what extraordinary prescience on the part of Valda Dagnell, the play's director! What is more, she has cast Mick and Irene Glynn as Mr & Mrs Gulick, so line-learning and rehearsals shouldn't have been too difficult to arrange during lockdown...

I found it a little difficult to understand why Ms Oates was so prescriptive, in her introductory piece, concerning her intention that the piece should not be a realistic work, emphasizing the importance of resisting "any inclination toward the establishment of character". The title of the piece is obviously a clue to this; she wants, it seems, to create a dissonance between what might be seen as a story steeped in human emotion and its treatment by the impersonal TV interviewer, perhaps as a satirical comment on the increasingly intrusive nature of the media nowadays. This is all very well on paper, as an intellectual exercise, but I can't help thinking that a theatre audience will feel a desperate need to get involved with these sad, colourless people. It will be interesting to see how this is resolved in performance.

PS: Incidentally, I had sensed that the play might be based on a true story but could find no reference anywhere to Carl Gulick or the murder of young Edith Kaminsky in 1990, except as mentioned in the *Tone Clusters* script. Mick however told us, after the performance, that the names of those involved had been changed and that the perpetrator was in fact a 21 year old body builder named Robert Golub who is still in prison for the horrifically violent sexual murder of his neighbour's daughter 13 year old Kelly Tynyas in New York State in 1989, for which he had eventually admitted responsibility, I gather. He has a parole hearing this November.

THE PRODUCTION

Presentation

The tabs were open when we came into the auditorium, so that we could see the simple set – two soft and rather comfy-looking leather swivel chairs in a grey/brown colour, with a coffee table between them and a large black box in front, angled up towards the chairs and labelled TV Monitor 4 – good. I liked the cables snaking back across the stage, though couldn't identify the sheets of A5 sized green/blue patterned ? paper scattered about – were these trip-hazard warnings maybe? On top of a 4' high black rostrum just behind the chairs was a sheet of white fabric. This wasn't pulled very taut – it was sagging in places and the creases were very evident, which made it all look uncharacteristically scruffy. It was clearly going to be the screen on which the many images would be projected and I think much more trouble needed to be taken to make it as flat as possible, especially since it held 'pride of place' on the virtually empty stage as far as we, the audience, were concerned.

Brian's lighting was simple and effective, with good general cover and clean blackouts. I think the studio effect might have been enhanced with some stage-level side-lighting from the wings but this might well have been a step too far for a festival production. The initial high intensity front-light which had the Gulicks dazzled and blinking might, I thought, have been sustained for longer and reduced very gradually/imperceptibly to a comfortable ambient level as the two of them became accustomed to 'TV studio lighting'. Sound was well used throughout – the dissonant chords at the start made it clear that this was going to be an unconventional piece, but I reckon you might have made a bit more of this by starting the effect in the darkness and then adding the startling light. The Voice was, I assume, coming through stage L speakers, and I wondered whether you could have made this a bit more dominating by making it louder and 'surround-sound' in nature.

Props weren't really a feature but the carafe of water was a good idea and Frank sipped at his glass quite a bit, to good effect, though Mick seemed to make about 1" of water last for ages! Why, I wondered, did he not fill his wife's glass when he did his own? Possibly this was all part of being so unnerved. The spill on Emily's part was very well handled by Irene and Frank's mopping up with his hankie looked very natural. He also used his glasses well – avoiding the trap of restlessly taking them off and putting them on again.

Costume was interesting. It seemed to me that you had decided from the outset that the significant thing about the Gulicks was that they were colourless and completely unremarkable. So, it seemed entirely appropriate that what they were wearing – tones of grey and beige – should neatly match the colour of the leather chairs. It was almost as though they were camouflaged! However, as an audience member, I was desperate for a bit of colour, and even found the red 'RECORDING' sign provided a

bit of welcome relief from the monochrome drabness. Perhaps you felt this too, because you put burgundy-coloured cushions on the two chairs, which we could appreciate in the pre-set, though they pretty much disappeared behind the Gulicks once they sat down.

The projections were the hero of the presentation element of this production, in my opinion, and most of them were in colour, hurrah! The cueing of these seemed very smooth and there were some nice optical tricks to provide a bit of movement and flow. I gather Charlie had spent many hours researching the images on the internet and I thought he did a tremendous job; no clunks at all – bravo!

Direction

I really do congratulate you, Valda. This seemed, when I read it, to be an inordinately difficult piece – especially if you were planning to follow faithfully the author's apparent instructions – and I could see and appreciate that you and your team had invested an enormous amount of effort in bringing it from page to stage and making it work.

Despite Ms Oates strictures, I got the impression that you'd decided to allow Mick and Irene a bit of room to personalise these poor bewildered parents, to good effect, but I have to admit that I am still not clear about the role of the Voice, as she conceived it and as you interpreted it. Though the structure of the piece had some of the features of an interview, the questions as asked were largely based around requesting the Gulicks to comment on the Voice's absurd pontifications! Neil's American accent was very credible and his voice in this format was generally neutral in tone, but I wasn't sure why he adopted a faux German accent for the more superficially 'erudite' stuff. There is no indication that this is what the author had in mind and I found it reduced the absurdist effect, paradoxically. I think was I expecting more of a sense of command and control, steadily increasing the pressure on the hapless pair, and I reckon a sense of progression throughout the nine scenes wasn't really sustained - I'm not sure whether this was in the writing or in the direction.

In many ways your job as Director was simplified by the fact that your two cast members were required to be in their chairs throughout. Inevitably this made the production very static and I recognised and appreciated several subtle attempts to inject a little bit of movement into the proceedings – gestures to the screen behind, for instance, when the Gulicks realised their house was being featured, and later Frank was clearly watching the monitor at his knee level when Carl's trophies were being displayed. The spilling of the water was also a welcome interlude, very nicely handled by both of them I thought, and even Frank loosening the knot on his tie was of interest visually. At the start Emily, in particular, looked very busy with her stress-relieving fidgets and I think this risked being overdone – less is often more when

your audience is very alert to visual cues, especially when first meeting a character. However, I would have liked more awareness, on their part, of the imagined images on the monitor in front of them, with a bit of leaning in and focussing perhaps, initially, and then the discovery that they were also projected behind them would have made more sense, I felt. The breakdown in the recording was exactly as scripted, as far as I could tell, and this section was very nicely done I thought, especially as it provided some contrast and a break from the relentless interview style.

Pace was another area where I felt there might be room for a bit more variety. The interweaving and sometimes overlapping dialogue was generally very well handled by Mick and Irene, as one might expect (given their talent, their experience of performing on stage together, and their opportunity to line-run endlessly), and this generated lots of pace, of course. However, I felt a bit 'battered' after a while and badly wanted some reflective pauses – in addition to the breathers offered by the brief inter-scene blackouts. The running time was almost exactly 45 minutes I reckoned, and I think you might have allowed as much as an additional 5 minutes if you'd taken the relentless pressure off their responses to the Voice and allowed us to savour some of the points being made. Paradoxically I think I would have been looking for more pace from Neil and would have wanted this wound tighter and tighter as the Gulicks floundered.

Acting

I thought the standard of acting was very high, and all three of your cast gave the impression that they were extremely well-rehearsed. Not once did I sense that they were lost in the torrent of language we heard and would have been very surprised if anyone needed a prompt, but then I would expect nothing less from IES!

The Gulicks: I hope you won't mind if I address both Mick and Irene together in this section? You are ideally suited to play this couple of course, and it was lovely to see what a good job you made of it, with credible accents, apparently flawless lines, very natural phrasing and tremendous pace. You both seemed to embody bewilderment, and a certain amount of righteous anger, and this was very effectively done, with an excellent eye for detail. I admired these performances very much. I think however that there was room to show us a bit more erosion of confidence as the play progressed and the virtual certainty of their son's guilt became apparent to us as the audience. I would have liked to see them becoming increasingly unsure of themselves under the pressure exerted by the Voice, faltering in their responses, more reflective maybe, as they descended into pathos. Does this make any sense?

The Voice: Clearly you will have had to make a decision, Neil, right at the start, as to how to approach this role and, perhaps because there are times when the character seems to be an interviewer, and others when he is pontificating on matters of science and philosophy, you seemed to have split him into two elements in terms of voice

style and accent. I confess I found this a bit confusing and unexpected. Having read the script a few times (not nearly as many as you did of course!) I thought that he might begin fairly gently and encouragingly but that the genial interviewer would gradually become harsh inquisitor, applying more and more pressure as the details of Carl's crime emerged. I suppose I was reminded, very distantly, of the bullying Professor in Ionesco's *The Lesson*. This interpretation is not really supported by the text of course, and probably I am doing you, and the author, a disservice by trying to make any sense of the role! My justification however is that we, the audience, need to do so, and will work very hard to satisfy that need. If however it proves impossible then I think the natural reaction is to lose interest and wander off – figuratively.

Summary

The overall impression this production made on me was one of concerted effort on all sides. The whole team were in fine form, I thought, and produced a very significant piece of theatre. I was asked, by Brian on the way out, if I'd enjoyed it, and I have to admit that on the whole it frustrated me a great deal more than it enlightened or entertained me. But perhaps this was the author's intention! Whatever my reaction I genuinely admired it and the work which had gone into it. Thank you so much for inviting us to come and watch.

Valda – by now you will have heard the glad tidings that *Tone Clusters* has gone through as Somerset's representative in the Western Area semi-final. I have deliberately made my adjudication as honest and helpful as I can, and I hope you will find some of it interesting and useful in your preparation for the next round. You would, after all, have had the benefit of an independent appraisal from Nick Wilkes, had we been able to go ahead with the Preliminary round at the Warehouse as planned.

I will of course see you at the Merlin, because I am the Festival Stage Manager on that occasion!

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