

Under Milk Wood

IES Ilminster 25 October 2019

The Play

First broadcast in 1954, the year after Dylan Thomas died, and performed in countless guises ever since, Under Milk Wood was written as “A Play for Voices”. Part play, part poetry, it has been read, staged and filmed, but above all, it is meant for the ear. However you decide to present it, with or without scenery, read or performed without scripts, it needs the ability to share with your audience the verbal subtlety, the rhythm and music of the poetry, while at the same time bringing out the wonderful characterisations, the humour and vitality of the piece. Not a lot happens. There is no plot as such, but the succession of vignettes paints a picture of the inner life of each character, their joys and sorrows, their foibles and their dreams, with sensitivity and delicious humour. Each possesses “a salty individuality of their own”.

The cast may be 6 or 69. The set might depict the seascape or landscape of a small seaside town. It might be explicit or minimalist. Lighting will be instrumental in creating atmosphere and the passing of time, and perhaps depicting each little scene. Sound may also give the audience a flavour of the sea, the springtime and a sense of place. Then of course there is music, the wistful song of Polly Garter as she hangs out the washing, the school children’s playground chants and Mr Waldo’s beer-swilling song in the Sailor’s Arms as evening falls.

As with the set, costumes and props may be simple, and suggestive of character rather than elaborate. Pace will be important, but also, particularly for the First and Second Voices, there must be sensitivity to the poetry of the words, without being overly indulgent. Your audience will need time for the music of the words to create their own mental picture of the various scenes and characters, but not too much time – the long speeches, in particular should never drag, but simply allow us to be drawn into the magic.

Presentation

Before the start of the play proper, the curtains opened to give the audience an open, lit view of the set, giving us an impression of the lounge bar of Browns Hotel, once a favourite haunt of Dylan Thomas. Stage right was largely occupied by the bar, painted a uniform mushroom colour, the visible shelves well-stocked with bottles of stout. Upstage centre was a door, presumably leading to the outside or porch, with small glass pane through which the Welsh flag could be seen. To stage left there was a window with blind and muted light behind, presumably to denote the street outside. The walls were of uniform colour, and perhaps rather too pristine for a pub in the 1950s, when cigarette smoke and spilt beer might have rendered it somewhat more dingy, with the odd stain perhaps. The floor, which was being studiously swept by the barman before the start of the play was similarly clean, when he was more likely to have been tasked with sweeping up dog-ends and the debris of drinking customers. There was the feel of something between a lounge and public bar. The motley collection of chairs, barstools and tables was appropriate to a public bar at least, and there was a small dresser-cum-bookcase stage left with a nice hotchpotch of items – stone flagon, German beer-mug, silver cup,

leather-bound book, wireless, copper jug - and hung with a couple of old glass fishermen's floats. On the walls, upstage right there was a quirky coat stand with tree-like arms, from which hung various caps, hats and jacket. A ship's bell and dart board were hung to the right of the door, and small portrait of the young Queen Elizabeth to the left, with a rather sophisticated picture of yachts on the wall downstage left. The dart board would perhaps have been more at home in the public bar, but the yachts were definitely lounge bar.

Downstage right was hung the ship's clock, the hands of which "have stayed still at half past eleven for fifty years" – in view of its longevity, I wonder if the wooden casing would have been a bit darker and worn-looking. Upstage, just off centre, raised and angled slightly, was Captain Cat's rocking chair, which like the walls and décor generally, was perhaps a little too pristine and newly painted, when it would probably have been more used looking, with a comfy old cushion. There was little in the way of props, most functional objects being mimed by the various characters, apart from the various beer glasses, and couple of smaller glasses of some pinkish drink (difficult to identify from the colour) taken over to the table stage left by the women, and left there rather incongruously throughout the play until the bar scene at the end, when they were again taken up. Nogoodboyo made good use of the broom for his fishing rod, and the model ship on the bar was beautifully reflected on the back wall at one point to denote Schooner House. There was also a nice moment when the dart board was turned to become the porthole window. Lighting generally served the purpose of helping to create atmosphere and time of day, from pre-dawn to early morning, mid-morning and afternoon brightness, to dusk falling once more as night approaches and the light softens. The fade to near darkness for the start of the play was nicely punctuated with the use of candles and pale spotlight for the First Voice as he begins his commentary, although he did tend to move in and out of the light quite a lot. It might have been more effective to have used a soft-edged follow spot as he moved through his monologue. The light coming through the alcove behind the bar and palely illuminating the bar area was a nice touch. Candles were used effectively again later in the evening to create atmosphere and focus at the end of the play. During the course of the play, lighting could perhaps have been used more to denote each little vignette. Music was mainly used to good effect, with the few bars from "All through the night" an appropriate choice for the start of the play. Organ Morgan's organ playing in the middle of the morning rather drowned out some of the narration and could have been a little more distant perhaps. It worked better as an accompaniment to Rev Jenkins' sunset poem. The unaccompanied songs were beautifully sung, particularly Polly Garter's haunting melody, and the school children's chant. Mr Waldo's drinking song was delivered a little too politely, and could perhaps have been sung more raucously, which would also have given the others more impetus to join in with a rousing chorus at the end. Costumes were in keeping with how the average people in a small Welsh town in the 1950s might have dressed – nothing too startling. The women wore boldly patterned dresses, with v neckline or buttons down the front and full skirts flattering the feminine figure, and simple mid-heel shoes with strap/t-bar. Nylons were appropriately flesh-coloured, and jewellery consisted mainly of simple pearls. The men were conservatively dressed in brown or grey baggy flannel trousers, and white shirts, with nicely sourced striped woollen waistcoats for First and Second Voice, and a shiny blue-grey bow tie for First Voice in particular. The barman's stripy collarless shirt, grey waistcoat and apron were suitably functional. Captain Cat's jeans looked somewhat anachronistic, but his red scarf, black jacket and cap, and of course his sea-boots were part of his

character. Hair and make-up generally were fairly conservative, the women, again appearing softly feminine, and the First Voice, in particular having cultivated a suitably dishevelled look for the writer.

Production

The idea of setting the play in the lounge bar of the pub, and echoing its first performance by using just six actors, including the writer himself as First Voice was an interesting one. It was also a courageous one, demanding much versatility from each actor in playing numerous parts convincingly. To create the feeling of a play within a play, the actors needed to be absolutely familiar with their lines, whilst appearing to refer to their scripts. This created something of a dilemma, as in a 'real' rehearsed play reading, the actors would vary in how often they needed to glance at the script. They would also turn the page at much the same time. But this was a performance, and any unplanned pause when somebody momentarily lost their place left a gap, which interrupted the flow and even interfered with characterisation. There was also a bit of a problem with continuity, the actors appearing pretty much familiar with their words during the first half of the play, but generally having to refer to their scripts a lot more in the second half. The play reading performance format might have been better served if the actors had begun by looking at their scripts, and gradually used them less as they took on their characters. In terms of pace, the switch between each little vignette needs to be seamless, and there is no room for pauses in the dialogue without interrupting the flow of the piece. However, the narrative descriptions and commentary need to be spoken in such a way as to allow the words to do their magic, enabling the audience to create a mental picture of what is being described. The delivery must not be faster than the thoughts. Achieving the right pace is deceptively tricky in this play, not only for the three narrators (Captain Cat included), but also for the 'set pieces' of the Drowned, the Neighbours and the gossiping Women. Yes, these sequences of one-liners should be pacey, with good cue bite, but the actors need to be listening and responding to one another so that they are delivered as a conversation. The Waldo Neighbour's piece in the first act wasn't as convincing as it might have been, because there was no sense of conversation building between them. That said, the timing in the corresponding set piece of the gossiping Women in the second act worked better, maybe because the actors were warmed up by then, and had found the rhythm. The groupings for each little vignette worked well, with fluid movement around the stage, and good use of the whole acting area, although the First Voice had the occasional collision with a chair, possibly due to lack of rehearsal or minimal changes in the placing of chairs. The decision to place the interval halfway through the morning worked well, although the drawing of the tabs here felt a little incongruous, and it might have been more in keeping with the overall concept to have dispensed with the tabs altogether and used the lights to fade to blackout instead. There were some lovely moments – the school children pieces worked well, and there was lots of energy in the production as a whole, but I wonder if you would have been better served to have recruited a few more actors, partly to lift the burden on such a small cast, and for greater clarity in scenes such as the Drowned and particularly the Neighbours, when the voices of Wife and Mother and Little Boy were rather lost in delivery and confusing. This was a challenging play to perform and to satisfy your audience – those already familiar with it who brought their own expectations, and those with no preconceived notions, for whom the words were totally new. It demanded a good balance of energy and sensitivity to the

rhythm and pattern of the words, allowing space for our imagination to work. We needed time to both “Listen” and to “Look”.

The Actors

While it would be far too lengthy to comment on every character you played, it seems infinitely more sensible to make some general observations, and draw attention to the characters/roles which seemed particularly noteworthy.

Mike Leach as First Voice and Rev. Eli Jenkins

You had the huge responsibility of carrying the play, and particularly that first iconic opening section of narration. This monologue invites your listeners into the sleeping town, and in poetic prose sets the tenor of the play. You need to allow the words to create their pictures, to awaken the imagination of the audience and draw them in with skill and sensitivity. While softness of voice is suggested in the script, we did need to hear the words. I felt that sometimes your delivery was a little too soft, the pace too fast, and diction not always clear, so that some of those beautifully crafted lines were lost. You also moved in and out of the light a bit, which was rather distracting. While your movement around the stage in general became more relaxed as the play went on, it sometimes appeared rather aimless, you tended to bob up and down, and your narrations could perhaps have been delivered just as effectively from the vantage point of the barstool. I felt you were more comfortable playing the part of Rev Jenkins, since it might have been easier to pace and deliver the lines with greater sensitivity when in character.

John McGrouther as Second Voice and other characters

While the Second Voice has less responsibility in carrying the play, you made a good job of your narration, with well-paced and reflective delivery. Mr Pritchard appeared suitably enfeebled by his domineering wife and a life of failure, Cherry Owen, by contrast happy with his wife and pints of stout, and Lord Cut-Glass disturbingly manic. I felt that Willy Nilly could have been a little more postman-like in his movements, bustling up to the different doors, and showing us how he habitually reads every letter to their recipient, hence allowing the audience to enjoy the humour of the situation a bit more. Overall however, confident performances of each role with good differentiation between characters.

Eric Beckley as Captain Cat and other characters

Your portrayal of Captain Cat was sensitively delivered, although because of his blindness, there was some incongruity between when you were reciting the lines obviously learned, but needed to read the script for his narrative commentary, in particular. I felt that you were not really listening to what was going on outside, identifying the characters and actions you heard, and enabling us to see them too. You had quite a variety of characters to play in addition to the Captain, some of whom came across better than others. I thought you achieved the long-suffering simpering Mr Pugh in a nicely understated sinister way. Mr Waldo, however,

wasn't so convincing – I felt he could have been portrayed as a bigger, more raucous, unsavoury character. That said, you had quite differing roles to portray, which was no mean feat.

Theresa Ravenscroft as Rosie Probert and other characters

You played a huge number of characters, bringing great confidence and energy to each. To comment on a few of these, I felt you perfectly captured the ghastly Mrs Pugh, both in your body language and acid delivery of lines, and by contrast, your singing as Polly Garter was a pleasure to listen to. Your ability to laugh or scream was evident in Mrs Cherry Owen and Mrs Butcher Beynon, although you 'peaked' a little too early in both of these characters, so that the laughter/screeching became a little too shrill and repetitive. You could perhaps have slowed down your delivery of Mrs Dai Bread Two, allowing her to become more gypsy-like, "lolling gaudy at the doorway". Perhaps you could have wrested more comedy out of the crystal ball scene by appearing to be reading the visions in the ball in front of you. I also wonder if you might have slowed down your delivery in Rosie Probert's lines with Captain Cat. That whole sequence is a beautiful piece of poetry, and I felt the poignancy of the scene was missing as the lines were delivered a little too fast and flippantly – but that of course, is down to interpretation. Just one final word about your characterisation – Bessie Bighead is a tiny part, but you absolutely nailed it, largely by your physical stance and facial expression. You invoked an almost discernible sigh of pity from the audience at your portrayal of perhaps the most pathetic of all the various characters. Some lovely performances.

Marcus Palmer as Sinbad Sailors and other characters

Generally confident performances with a good sense of comic timing, particularly in your Nogood Boyo and PC Rees bits of business. You have a strong voice, which added strength to your characterisations, although could perhaps have been toned down a bit in the role of Mr Mog Edwards, who, as safely distant suitor of Miss Price, came across like the "thunderbolt-bass'd" lover of her dreams, rather than the little "draper mad with love", or perhaps this was the intentional interpretation. That said, I think your delivery was perfectly suited to the likes of the teasing Butcher Beynon and furious Utah Watkins.

Lucy Driver as Myfanwy Price and other characters

Efficient performances, and you had obviously put a lot of work into learning the lines of each. As a general point, I feel you could allow yourself to visualise your characters more, to really hear and see what they are saying. Just taking time to enter into each one a bit more could help produce more three-dimensional characterisations. With Myfanwy, for instance, try visualising her cosy home and how she might be sitting when she writes her weekly love-letter to Mog. And with Lily Smalls' set piece, there could have been more of a sense of conversation with herself in the mirror, facing your audience so that they could see your changes of facial expression. Similarly, with Mae Rose Cottage in her dreamy little piece "He loves me/He loves me not", just giving it a bit more time as she muses and blows the dandelion would have allowed your audience to enter the scene and given that last line a touch more humour. However, your rendition of the not-so-innocent child,

Gwennie in the school children scenes was nicely achieved, and the use of the forbidding glasses worked well on the imposing figure of Mrs Ogmores-Pritchard.

Summary

This was an interesting interpretation of how Under Milk Wood might be performed – and not an easy choice. A straight play reading might have been somewhat boring; a staged performance with more actors would have been simpler in some ways. What you chose to do was something rather more complicated, falling in between the two, and appearing a little incongruous as a result. That said, the transitions from vignette to vignette flowed seamlessly, and there was a huge amount of energy in the production, not to mention dedication from your small team of actors, who should be congratulated for their work in producing such a wide range of characters.

Thank you for inviting me to come along and watch your performance, and apologies if I have missed anything or failed to credit anyone.

Liz Holliss