

***Burn This* (KCACTF Written Response)**

Ottawa University

April 28, 2000

I enjoyed my return visit to Ottawa to see the final production of the season, Lanford Wilson's *Burn This*. As with my first visit the year before, I marveled that such a small theatre program is able to produce such intellectually and artistically challenging work and do it well. This is due no doubt to the fierce dedication of a handful of students and the ceaseless efforts of program director Larry Peters. Congratulations!

My introduction to the world of *Burn This* came with the set: the realistic interior of a Manhattan loft with one "great room" (living room, dining room, and kitchen) and doors leading to two bedrooms as well as to the exterior. At stage right, fragmented stud work defined the space as a loft and allowed the audience to continue its view of the painted skyline that covered the entire back wall. While ambitious and commendable given the size of the wall, the painting was neither realistic enough to be "believable" nor stylized enough to convey a subjective view or mood. Still, it sufficiently established the location and the imposing nature of the urban setting. I enjoyed the (above ceiling height) fragmentation, but I thought that the design might have been enhanced by continuing the studding/fragmentation throughout, thus breaking the monotonous single horizontal line of stage left.

The auditorium poses many challenges for any design and groundplan: the stage is very wide and open as is the audience seating configuration. The result for this production (as well as for *Racing Demon*) was a groundplan too wide and narrow/shallow to be fully functional. At stage right sat a table and chairs so close to the wall that anyone sitting upstage was virtually trapped. The sofa at stage left occupied the same plane as the table and, thus, created little visual interest or obstacle course for the action. Composition and blocking would have been improved greatly by a groundplan that created and facilitated more "acting areas" (Francis Hodge's classic textbook term), diagonals, and triangulation. As was, the set design and composition/blocking suffered from "flatness" due to the groundplan. Granted, this is much the fault of the auditorium, but I think there are ways to overcome it. One possibility would be to restrict the audience seating area so that sightlines could be reconfigured, thus allowing less width and more depth for the design and groundplan.

Balance was also a problem: action was often restricted to one small area of stage left or stage right, despite the fact that the entire, vast set was illuminated throughout. I realize that the lighting resources for this production were limited both in the number and types of instruments available, and I commend you for the evenness of your wash. Still, with few exceptions, the staging was either a table scene or a coach scene. Having more furniture strategically placed would have been appropriate for this apartment; further, it might have afforded an effective obstacle course for the action and, consequently, greater visual and psychological interest for the audience.

As I mentioned during our post-show discussion, the action as created by the actors' characters was committed and honest but often not authentic. An example early in the production was the late night arrival of Pale banging on Anna's door. Awakened from her sleep, Anna goes to the door and just opens it. In Ottawa, Sarah Lemp may enjoy such security but Anna in Manhattan would not. Pale is high on coke, yet there was little established by Kevin Fink's physical choices for Pale that corresponded to what his character

was saying; this was only exacerbated by his pristine appearance despite Pale's complaints about the heat and the physical discomfort he suffers when he thinks he is having a heart attack.

There were other moments when what we the audience heard from the text contradicted what we saw with the staging. In the first scene, we learn of Burton's "enthusiasm," yet Dorrell's choices suggested a calculated, impassive stoicism; not until the second act did he begin to establish an active relationship with Anna, but I never believed that the two were more than friends. A similarly contradictory example came during Pale's first scene when Larry rushes into the scene to ensure that his roommate Anna is ok, that she is safe. As staged, Nordgren's Larry seemed to be encountering the Avon lady rather than the eminent and real threat of Wilson's Pale. Such contradictions skew the relationships that the exposition labors to make; further, they suggest that the actors needed keener sense about their respective role at a given moment.

I read Wilson's script as a play about the "love affairs" Anna has with three very different men: the dependable, rational, and comforting Burton; the flamboyantly funny and ever willing to lend an ear and shoulder Larry; and the impetuous, manic, animal-sexy Pale. Her ideal man and mate would be all three of these combined into one. As staged, the audience experienced the rationality of Burton but never any of the real love shared with Anna, certainly nothing that might have suggested a real physical relationship between the two. Although Nordgren resigned himself to playing a gay character (no small feat given the campus' reaction recounted to me), his Larry was more closeted kid brother despite the lines he uttered; when we laughed, we did so more out of sympathy and mutual discomfort than with the situation. The kiss between Larry and Burton in Act II was telling in all the wrong ways: it revealed a lot about the actors but contradicted the relationship between the characters. Again, relationships are the key to this play.

In both productions I have seen at Ottawa, both Sarah Lemp and Kevin Fink have demonstrated remarkable skills: Sarah for the intensity and honesty of her portrayal and Fink for his versatility and no-holds-barred commitment to the character. What was needed more in this production was their evolving and very complex relationship, particularly how their characters connected with each other, so that, by the end of the play, we, the audience, would understand and buy what happens.

As we all noted during our discussion, the tempos throughout the first act were palpably slow. Yes, exposition can be cumbersome; however, any chance to define relationships can and must be dynamic, even in the first scene! The strongest scenes in this production came during the second act, mainly because the conflicts and objectives were so clearly established by the text. The key is making those objectives as clear during the first act. The likelihood that this will happen increases if the actors really listen to each other. Unfortunately, there were many times during the first act when I felt that they really weren't listening, making discoveries, and living "in the moment." The result was sluggish timing and muddy objectives.

Happily, most of Act II was very compelling, particularly the physically combative scene and the final scene. Wow!!! In those scenes, I sensed a keen awareness of the importance of moment and how high the stakes were for each character. Bravo!

Thank you for sharing your production of *Burn This* with me. *Racing Demon* and *Burn This* are tough, both intellectually and artistically, and I commend you for tackling them! That's what liberal arts theatre programs are all about! I look forward to seeing more of your work.