

Ghost Light by J. Peter Bergman

Sunday, November 6. Old 7:10am, new 6:10. Eastern Standard Time again. I lay awake for half an hour remembering the actor, the man, Robert Lohbauer, dead at 87, remembered by so many at a memorial tribute the day before in the Tina Packer Playhouse at Shakespeare and Company. And yet not as many as I thought would be in attendance. In a 90 minute program tribute was paid to the man. Some of his favorite songs were sung and played by Teresa Mango, David Joseph, Greg Boover, Malcolm Ingram, Caroline Caulkins, Ryan Winkles and Kelly Galvin, folks who worked with him on that stage and in other p[laces]. The passion of loss often entered their voices but they sang on, as he would have wanted, as he would have sung on also.

A quote from “Hamlet” graced the program cover, a simple statement of fact that spoke volumes about this actor: “He was a man, take him for all in all, I shall not look upon his like again.” A critic makes few friends in the theater. Actors keep their distance; no influencing the writer who may hold an actor’s future faith in what may come. Bad notices could deter a producer from offering another role; good notices may cry out kindness due to excessive friendship. Not so for Bob Lohbauer. When I returned to reviewing, at The Independent, he came up to me at a party and said, “You may write nasty things about me, Peter, but that doesn’t mean we can’t be friends.” I never forgot that heart-felt sentiment. I appreciated it more and more as the years went on. In the audience yesterday were other actors I consider friends. Anne Undeland, Michelle Joyner, MaConnia Chesser, James Warwick, Kevin Coleman, Elizabeth Aspenlieder, Annette Miller. These are not my closest pals, but they are people who inform my life. They bring me joy and sorrow in a mixed measure and I am grateful for that.

Friends, companions, family paid tribute to Bob on that stage. At each end of each row in the audience boxes of tissues had been placed and they did come in handy. I used one when the stories about him got too funny and provoked a sadness that couldn’t be held back. I never really knew him well. His wife, Govane, and I had more of a relationship. She helped me costume my first Historic House play at the Clapp House in Pittsfield and she helped me costume myself for my last performance in a filmed historic tour. But Bob Lohbauer had a way of making you feel you were special to him. Never very close, his face would literally light up whenever he and I met, usually by accident. He truly glowed with that proffered friendship and his smiling eyes left me feeling better than I, perhaps, deserved. It’s something impossible to forget, that sort of personal joy.

In the tradition of the theater when the memorial was concluded, when the performance was done, a free standing lamp was carried onto the stage. It was set downstage center and remained alight as the company of family, friends, professional companions and admirers slowly left the space. A ghost light. It’s a tradition that goes back into the 19th century when theaters were lit with gas-light. Some believe that it gives the ghosts of actors the feeling that they can still perform for one another, and for us if we happen to be in the theater. Its practical purpose is to keep people from having accidents on a darkened stage. It’s true meaning is that it welcomes the spirit of friendship and professionalism at those times when they are needed. During this Covid era it has symbolized even more, as a way of indicating that our theaters will re-open. So it was for Bob Lohbauer for whom the theater never closed. His life was filled with the enjoyment of the world that obeyed the sentiments of the song David Joseph sang: “Try to Remember.” I will never forget this man. Surely no one who knew him, or saw him, ever will.

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