

Barrington Stage Company, Pittsfield, MA

Faith Healer by Brian Friel. Directed by Julianne Boyd.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman

“I suppose the other extreme was ‘Am I a conman?’”



Christopher Innvar
as Frank Hardy

Mark H. Dold
as Teddy

Gretchen Egolf
As Grace

Brian Friel’s play “Faith Healer” is many things. It’s a difficult play. It is four exhausting monologues by three characters at the center of the Fantastic Francis Hardy’s story. It is an Irish “Rashomon” with each character remembering the incidents of a personal tragedy differently. It is also a devastating experience for its audience. The first two scenes are painful; intermission; the third scene is comic but the least happy of them all and the final one adds confusion to the mix while it tells its story of the ultimate experience. It is a play for adults about adults. Children won’t understand it and seniors may find it too close to the reality of their own lives. It is exhausting. It is so very worthwhile, especially in this extraordinary production.

It’s also a very true story. Frank Hardy is based on a real person. America’s Edgar Cayce shared some of the same experiences and so, for an American audience, there is a certain sense of recognition that brings up things we don’t like to think about. At the St. Germain Stage in Barrington Stage Company’s Sydelle and Lee Blatt Center for the Performing Arts a superb company of artists, which is what they all are, has put together a production of Friel’s play that will not be easily forgotten. Directed by Julianne Boyd the play forces adults to think which is not always what summer audiences are looking for. But think they will for think they must. It is the demand of this play and its demands must be dealt with before the night is through.

Christopher Innvar plays Francis (Frank) Hardy. He opens the play and he closes it with



Christopher Innvar; Photo: Daniel Rader

unruffled, unaffected by the incidents of his own life. His parents' deaths leave him without passion. His wife's reality as a public mistress provides him with a sensuality he doesn't possess. Innvar tells his tale without any aggressiveness and he makes it all sound probable. As an actor he is very true to Friel's writing and he is very successful in his retelling of Frank's story. His manner of telling the tales is true to the poetry of the writing and honest in the extreme. You can fall in love with him and grieve his loss for as a faith healer he is only successful on rare occasions.

Gretchen Egolf plays his wife Grace. Grace has given up a legal career for Frank, given up a moral life to pose as his unwed spouse for a hungry public eager to adore a man of Godlike powers. A smoker, a drinker, Grace lives within her own isolated world always on the perimeter of Frank's sordid grandeur. Her story is emotional and moving and Egolf tells it with deliberation and a calm that is occasionally chilling. Egolf works wonders with her character's personal tragedies, her relationship with her disapproving father, the loss of her stillborn child. Her exit from the stage is a release and a relief. She is almost too much to take. Egolf's Grace is a woman whose knowledge of her own shortcomings is exceeded only by her understanding of her strengths. She lives the dilemma of realism.



Gretchen Egolf; Photo: Daniel Rader

his solo speeches. Some of what he tells us are lies, or possibly lies, or at least the untruths he believes to be true. His profession leaves us wondering about him and his story. He is a faith healer. He can cure people's severe ills with the power of his mind, with his touch, with the warmth of his hands. All he requires from the patients is their belief in him and his power to perform such acts. That's all. Innvar is terrific. He has a calm in his voice and movement that seems just perfect for Frank. He is



Mark H. Dold; Photo: Daniel Rader

Teddy, Frank's manager, is played with panache and humor by Mark H. Dold whose comic appearance and verbal style matches his drinking and his adoration of both an old Fred Astaire recording and Grace Hardy - all in equal measure. He is the play's mood-breaker and Dold keeps it normal and simple and unforced. When his version of the Hardy story turns sour, as it must, Dold never varies his performance of the lines and the combination of sorrow and sarcasm give him

plenty of opportunity to affect us with his misplaced adoration. The actor makes the man into someone we feel we've met somewhere and enjoyed, but never liked. His personal tales of professional associations may seem silly, but they reveal the man's ego, or lack of same, and his devotion to the Hardy's sits right in line with his entanglement with a talented whippet and his now retired pigeon lady.

The ending of the play seems obscure but the true tale is told and it explains what we've heard before from Teddy and Grace. We can be totally sure who among the speakers is alive to tell the story and who is dead; what the order of demise has been, and the one thing we can say about this trio is that they lived as they could, as they would and as they should. There were no choices for them; they were self-committed to one another and to the dream of faith and its power to heal.

Set designer Luciana Stecconi has fulfilled Friel's description as best she could. The stage suffices scene to scene. Jen Caprio's costumes are clothing and they keep the people real and individual. The lighting of the show by David Lander keeps the moments realistic and yet isolated. It's a great look for this play: real and yet unreal, alive and yet dead.

This is a hard play to get through. It's a very worthwhile play for Barrington Stage's four artists to have put together. Thank you Alan Paul and Debra Jo Rupp for making this happen. Bravo to Boyd, Innvar, Egolf and Dold. They prove that you don't have to be pleasant to be good; you don't have to be outright to be honest. Difficult work is so very worthwhile in the theater and Boyd is welcome back to the theater she created with this incredible work. She is to be applauded at every turn here. Welcome home, Julie Boyd!

+ 08/05/2023 +

Faith Healer plays on the St. Germain Stage in the Sydelle and Lee Blatt Center for the Performing Art, 30 Linden Street, Pittsfield, Massachusetts through August 27. For information and tickets go to barringtonstageco.org or call 413-236-8888.