theatres...

Historical play employs Scots dialect

By Jeff Stokes

According to playwright John Arden, "Armstrong's Last Goodnight" is a play "founded upon history; and indeed it comes close to being a cross between Shakespeare's 'Macbeth' and Sir Walter Scott's Rob Roy..." A student of Scottish or English history would surely find this play fascinating, especially as it is presented in the Scots 'language.' But amongst the line: 'Armstrong's Last Goodnight' will probably prompt reactions, for several reasons.

One of these reasons is that we usually go to the Theatre Company of Boston's productions expecting a more contemporary social, prolix, poetic lines reflecting the existential trend of modern thinking. The play is almost reverie to (or revival of, depending on your tastes in theatre) the Elizabethan era; Johnny Armstrong is no less an element of a tragic hero, except that he doesn't speak in iambic pentameter.

A variety of tongues

The lines are poetic, providing one can grasp enough of the dialect, and this brings us to the second reason why many people may feel a sense of frustration at this play. The program includes a short glossary of Old Scots terms, which, unfortunately, isn't quite complete. It turns out you have to know a little French, since Sir Davie Lindsay and his paramour decide to converse for a while in that language; and a knowledge of German may help you with some of the Scots dialect.

A complex subject

Thus for a full appreciation of Arden's work one has to untangle both the language and the chaotic political conditions of the Scots-English border in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. At the time of the play, around 1480, it was the custom of the English lords and Scottish lairds along the border to exchange raided each other's livestock. King James the Fifth, then in his teens, and his attendant Lords became concerned lest the rampages of these border chieftains be brought on another war with the English. Although one of the Border chieftains was John Armstrong, Laird of Glunclock, and the play deals with this duality, it is Armstrong, and of his Herald and Tutor, David Lindsay, to bring this out to execution.

The tragic hero

Armstrong was a very significant man, a kind of Nietzschean lion, and a philosopher of 'imperial' foundations. He has ideas that are part of his grand ego, an opinion that is easily fostered into trusting the King; and thus he is brought down by the will of lesser men than himself. Crafty Ulysses survived the Trojan war, but Armstrong was undone by his own chivalry which men of honor and chivalry cannot forsake. The play is Andrews's last good night on earth, the culmination of his life, the occasion when one can grasp enough of the dialect to realize what it means, and perhaps decide for yourself whether it requires some sophistication on the part of the listener, or whether it requires some sophistication on the part of the speaker, and thus re-creates some of the atmosphere of the Elizabethan master's work.

For all these reasons, I have composed entirely or almost entirely of Americans, the Scots dialect was employed fairly well. Charles Stewart as Sir David Lindsay and Joanne Lane as his mistress are excellent performers. Larry Bryggman as John Armstrong is a strong and convincing tragic hero; and in general the supporting roles were effectively carried out. The Company has demonstrated the breadth of its talent, and if the play is a bit abstruse, the actors are certainly not at fault.

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