"The Knee Plays" meet high expectations

THE KNEE PLAYS
Scenario by Robert Wilson
Music and words by David Byrne
Choreography by Susushi Hanayagi
Directed by Robert Wilson
At the Loeb Drama Center, 64 Brattle St., Cambridge, through Oct. 5.

BY MICHAEL BOS

How Fashionable Can You Get? It is a question which almost inevitably comes to mind in connection with The Knee Plays, which started a two-week run at the Loeb Drama Center last weekend. With the names of playwright Robert Wilson and Talking Head David Byrne to top the roster, the production has come to Cambridge under favorable auspices if ever there were any. Fortunately, it stands up to the challenge: while not rising above expectations, it does not fall short of them either, which should be enough to make it obligatory seeing.

As their name suggests, The Knee Plays were not conceived to stand on their own; rather, they originated as interludes joining different scenes in Wilson's, well, opera

The Civil War, which this fall will be seen in New York City under favorable auspices if ever there are any. Wilson's opera is an almost entirely wordless work, with the unprecedented use of a chamber ensemble of Beethoven's music. The Knee Plays, which are essentially a series of five-minute pieces (with occasional set changes), are meant to provide a focal point, a framing and connecting function, all of them fitting into a single narrative, but each 'reflects its context in The Civil War.'

For I., Scene I, a few years before the Civil War begins, a young man prepares to go off to war. In Scene III, Scene I, which takes place after the Civil War ends, a woman is having trouble coping with her husband's exit. This motif of the cycle is taken up again in Scene IV, where a young boy prepares for battle. Finally, in Scene V, a young girl prepares to take her life.

The Knee Plays are, as the work's "American" section, premiered in Minneapolis during the spring of 1985. Since then Wilson's star, already highly visible abroad, has rapidly scaled the magnitudes. His work, for which the names of playwright Robert Wilson and Talking Head David Byrne have been so prominent, has drawn wide attention. The Knee Plays, which are essentially a series of five-minute pieces (with occasional set changes), are meant to provide a focal point, a framing and connecting function, all of them fitting into a single narrative, but each 'reflects its context in The Civil War.'

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