

DISPATCHES FROM TEXAS: EARL TRACY—THE MUSICAL

As the house lights slowly dimmed in the Richard Slocumb Theatre on the campus of San Jacinto College in Pasadena, Texas, the crowd quickly hushed. A feeling of anticipation crackled in the humid October air—that something magical was about to happen.

A lone spotlight illuminated a stone archway. After what seemed like an eternity—though in reality was only a couple seconds—a solitary figure strode in to the light. Dressed in a black suit coat and pants, crisply starched white shirt, and fedora, he lingered for a moment, drawing the audience's attention to his presence. Then he began to speak.

“My name's Earl Tracy,” he said. “Maybe you've heard of me.”

And so for the next 2½ hours, we watched and listened as a group of Texans—a cast that ranged in age from preteens to senior citizens—told the story of a man whose activities created a myriad of emotions amongst the people of his hometown. The words, the songs, the dance sequences, the visuals, and the evocative monologues of the man who portrayed Earl, made all of us realize that his life was a journey few of us could have imagined.

Not Sure What To Expect

As the house lights dimmed, I felt many conflicting emotions. How would I react to hearing the names of so many places and people who I had either known only through their faces in a photograph, or in some cases, on a personal level. To hear those names being spoken by people who have likely never been to Cokato, let alone Minnesota, was at first a bit disconcerting. But as the play progressed, I saw how they had done what all good actors do, they became their characters, filling the theatre with the feelings and emotions that made the audience connect with them—almost as if a small part of Minnesota had been transported to the lowlands of southeast Texas.

Knowing long beforehand that this production was a work of fiction only based on real people, I had to check my museum director's credentials at the door. But after the play was done, after all the hugs were shared, and photos were taken, I had the chance to visit with many of the cast and crew. Through the course of those conversations, it struck me how they had come to truly appreciate the people they were portraying. It was amazing to listen as the young men who played the parts of Carlton Lee and Millard Ahlstrom quizzed me about those men were “really like.” Or to field the excited questions from other cast members as they wanted so to know so much about Cokato, more than I ever imagined the average Texan wanting to know.

Finer Points of The Show

The playbill featured the trademark photo of one of Cokato's most memorable characters from the 1930s, a photo of a man who some would say was a fraud, while others will claim to their last breaths that he healed them. “Earl Tracy,” it read. “The Man. The Mystique. The Musical.” The inside of the program contained numerous credits for help with directing and choreography, profiles of cast members, and a synopsis of the play. But the program also contained a section of genuine thanks to all the Cokato people who participated in the research end of the production—especially those who were willing to share their memories and thoughts about Tracy.

The stage was simple and functional. Gust Akerlund's studio skylight, the town band gazebo—where sat the musicians who listed themselves in the playbill as “The Cokato Band”—and the stone wall and archway from the Tracy house helped the audience feel the character's connection to the setting of the play.

At several points in the production, a large screen hung above the stage, projecting images of people and places from Cokato's past. Street scenes, World War I soldiers, the Sweet Shop, newspaper clippings, and of course, the haunting image of Earl Tracy. For the audience, these images provided a way of helping them understand the real stories behind the characters. To see the headline from the Minneapolis Tribune story about Earl activities in Cokato as the stage actors recited their lines about that sequence of events, or to gaze into the eyes of the men and women whose names we read in the playbill, made all of us understand that this was more than just words in a script or lyrics on sheet music.

The audience was treated to Gust Akerlund's thick brogue as he tried to keep his photo subjects still; they saw the scowl on John Tracy's face as he looked upon Emma and Earl's relationship with apprehension bordering on jealousy; they felt the pain of Emma Tracy as she traveled through the life of teenage bride, young mother, loving wife, and grieving widow; and connected with Earl Tracy, through the words and actions of a young man named Brian Hamlin, who captured Tracy's essence so well that one audience member thought that it was Hamlin's photo on the cover of the program, not Tracy's.

The most enjoyable aspect of the play was the music. All the original songs were written by Marianne Kreitlow. “It's Changed,” speaks to the eternal lament how, as we grow in age, our town is not always what we remember it. “Emma's Song” helped us understand the emotional journey of the child-bride who would bring Earl into the world. “All of Life” was a rousing melody that, with the entire cast, unleashes Earl's healing talents and his penchant for living large, exemplified by the opening song of the second act, “Chicago,” an homage to the legend of Tracy being a stand-in for Al Capone.

Other songs spoke to the reaction of towns people to Tracy. “Take A Jump” provides insights into Earl's penchant for making passes at local ladies, and the reaction of one as she tells him to “take a jump in the lake, mister.” “Take Our Pain Away” shows how so many believed in Tracy's healing powers.

But by far the most memorable song was simply titled “Earl Tracy.” Sung at various times by the Tracy character and members of the cast, this song provided bookends for the production. In the beginning it introduces us to Tracy, with lyrics like “Maybe you've brought a wife, or child, or ailing parent to me.” At the finale, as Earl passes back through the archway where we first met him, the entire cast is singing “Everything you've heard is true, I see with an inner light. Spirit tells me what to do, I can help, you.”

A Mix of Cultures

Many of the cast members went to great lengths to attain the proper accents for their characters. With Cokato-native Carl Norman's help, the character of Gust Akerlund drew many laughs with

his line “Okay, now show your teets.” Translation: show your teeth, i.e. smile. The best of this came from Julia Jay, who played the role of Emma Tracy, Earl’s mother. Her rendition of a Swedish childhood nursery rhyme/hide-and-seek game left many in the audience in tears.

The same could not always be said about the guests from Minnesota. The two best moments came in some unpredictable settings. The first came when our rental car agent looked at me and asked “What country are you from?” Apparently he had never heard a true Midwest accent. But the best comment came from the youngest member of the cast who, after the performance, noted to me while she had little difficulty understanding us “northerners,” she thought we “had a little trouble with your ‘r’s.”

Final Thoughts

This play has been entered in the Kennedy Center American College Theatre Festival. This festival aims to identify and promote quality in college-level theatre production. The drama department at San Jacinto has had success before in this event. If this entry advances past regional competition, it will be performed as a part of the national festival at the Kennedy Center for the Arts in Washington D.C.

As for the local angle, we hope at some point to play a video-tape of the play. The producers have given us permission to do this, but please be aware that we will not be able to make copies.

Finally, some thanks are in order: to Margaret and Sharon Anderson for making the journey to Houston and putting up with my sometimes erratic driving; to Carl Norman for all his assistance to the play’s producers and for joining us at one of the performances; to Michael John Smith (a grandson of N. F. Johnson) for his hospitality; and of course, the entire cast and crew for their energy and dedication to this project—you have shown what is possible when determination takes hold.