

Getting Out

‘The Amish Project’

By SHEILA BARTH
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On Oct. 2, 2006, the country was rocked with grief, when a lone gunman shot schoolgirls in a one-room schoolhouse in the Old Order Amish community of Nickel Mines, Bart Township, Lancaster County, Pa. During a police stand-off, he murdered five students, severely injured five others, then committed suicide.

According to reports, before the massacre, he ordered male students, parents with infants, and a pregnant woman to leave. A child who didn’t speak English luckily followed her brother out the door.

He then lined up 10 female students, ages 6-13, in front of a chalkboard, bound them, and allegedly shot each one in the back of the head, execution style. The

survivors were left with lifelong debilitations.

The gunman, Charles Carl Roberts IV, was a 33-year-old milk deliveryman who made regular stops at some of these Amish students’ farmhouses. He was the married father of three. His 31-year-old wife Marie was at a Bible study group at the time of her husband’s killing spree. He left four suicide notes, one for his wife, and each child.

Instead of hating the killer, the Amish families showed incredible strength, kindness, and forgiveness, visiting and comforting the widow and Roberts’ parents. They also shared charitable donations with the widow.

This heinous blot on American history rattled the nation, inspiring several non-fiction books, and playwright-actress Jessica Dickey’s one-act, one-person, fictionalized play,

which she performed to rave reviews in 2009 at Rattlestick Playwrights Theater. Dickey portrayed several fictionalized characters, rapidly switching from one person to another, never changing her costume - only her voice and body language.

Like Dickey, actress Danielle Kellermann delivers a compelling performance at New Repertory Theatre’s Black Box Theater, kicking off its festival of women theater-makers, featuring three, one-woman performances.

Kellermann, originally from South Africa and a Boston University graduate, wears typical Amish clothing - designer Emily Astorian’s plain dress, a white, fitted hair-covering bonnet, and white apron.

Alexander Grover’s sparse, rustic Nickel Mines setting consists of a slatted wooden back-

ground with a window cutout, and one wooden chair.

Kellermann’s characters shift back and forth in rapid fire (forgive the pun) succession, from a little girl writing on a chalkboard, to various other individuals, whose paths are interwoven. She portrays gunman Eddie Stuckey, 33; his wife; two victims, the happy little girl, who loves to romp through the flowers, spread her wings and fly, and her teen-age sister; a victim’s kindly, forgiving father; a pregnant, Hispanic, teen-age supermarket employee - on Route 30, she says - and a middle-aged college professor-expert on Amish culture and their friend, who becomes their spokesman. He’s also our erstwhile narrator.

Although Kellermann’s performance is riveting (kudos also to director Elaine Vaan Hogue), she shifts character too rapid-

BOX OFFICE

One-act, one-person play, written by Jessica Dickey, appearing through March 22, at New Repertory Black Box Theater, Arsenal Center for the Arts, 321 Arsenal St., Watertown. Showtimes: March 20, 21, at 8 p.m.; March 18, 22, at 7:30 p.m.; March 19, at 2, 7:30 p.m.. Check for talkbacks. For tickets and more information, call the Box Office at 617-923-8487 or visit newrep.org.

ly, changing only her voice and demeanor. There’s so much pathos, emotion, and trauma in Dickey’s fictitious characters, we need more physical change, perhaps a costume accessory, to indicate her transition from man, woman, child, teenager, news-caster, and we need time to share their pain.

While “The Amish Project” is a terrific vehicle for spotlighting outstanding actresses’ talent, we need more.

Also, this story is so gut-wrenching, it needn’t be fictionalized, nor rushed. Plays

like “The Laramie Project” and its 10-year sequel, along with the haunting, horrific true story, “Our Class,” bear witness to the fact that authenticity leaves a greater, more indelible mental imprint. This story of unbearable pain, loss, and forgiveness must be told, over and over again, especially in this violent era.

The Amish community tore down that schoolhouse, built a new one, the New Hope School, on another site, as the community rallied around the families. What a lovely sequel and legacy to America’s strength.

‘Katya Kabanova’

By SHEILA BARTH
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Beautiful voices, stirring emotions, and fabulous Boston Lyric Opera orchestration, under the baton of conductor David Angus, dominate Boston Lyric Opera’s one-act, 100-minute opera, “Katya Kabanova”.

Boston theatergoers are treated to the opera company’s first, five-performance run of Czech composer Leos Janacek’s tragic tale of a sad, tormented, emotionally delicate young wife, her weak husband, her domineering, cruel mother-in-law, and her one attempt at happiness- her dalliance with a lover.

This version was originally conceived by stage director Tim Albery for Opera North (U.K.) Production and is sung in Norman Tucker’s English translation, aided by two upper-level monitors on both sides of the stage. Janacek wrote “Katya Kabanova” in 1919-21, based on A.N. Ostrovsky’s play, “The Storm”. He dedicated several of his operas and fashioned his heroine, Katya, after the beautiful Kamila Stosslova, a much younger, married woman, whom he admired and fantasized about.

She didn’t share his ardor.

The opera has been popularly performed internationally, and is enthusiastically received here. There are only five performances, so opera lovers must buy tickets quickly to catch one of the final three this week.

Set in Russia, designer Hildegard Bechtler emphasizes the region’s stark, depressing village, along the banks of the Volga River. Her large background panels are varying shades of dark green, representing the flora and dismal interior trappings of the Kabanova small-town village home. Her costumes are primarily the inhabitants’ drab, basic black.

Janacek’s tale is typical of tragic operas. Peter Mumford’s lighting and the orchestra’s storm and emotion effects intensify the dramatic tone.

We meet beautiful young Katya, who is unhappy in her marriage to matriarch-dominated Tichon Kabanov (wonderful tenor Alan Schneider). Tichon loves Katya, but weakly buckles under his cruel mother, Kabanicha’s, demands. Soprano Elizabeth Byrne is deliciously mean and domineering as Kabanicha, her voice laced with jealousy

and anger. She carries her role out to the nth degree, scowling at us through her final bows.

To make her daughter-in-law’s life more wretched, Kabanicha sends Tichon on a business trip and refuses to let Katya accompany him, despite Katya’s desperate pleas. Katya secretly yearns for Boris Grigoryevich, (tenor Raymond Very), who is madly in love with her. She begs Tichon to make her pledge her faithfulness to him while he’s gone, which he considers unnecessary, until Kabanicha insists he force Katya to openly pledge her loyalty to him - and to her - during his absence.

Cuban-American soprano Elaine Alvarez’s voice soars, and her acting is heart-rending in the title role. Her sole friend is Tichon’s suppressed foster sister, Varvara (mezzo-soprano Sandra Piques Eddy), who has found her own secret route to happiness with handsome Vanya Kudrjasch (tenor Omar Najmi). While Varvara aids Katya in achieving happiness with lover, Boris, Vanya initially tries to discourage Boris, who is also depressed, under the cruel yoke of his rich uncle Dikoy (bass-baritone James Demler). Alvarez’

BOX OFFICE

Boston Lyric Opera presents its first production of Leos Janacek’s one-act, 100-minute opera, “Katya Kabanova,” music by Leos Janacek, libretto by Vincenc Cervinka, March 18, 20, at 7:30 p.m., March 22, at 3 p.m., at Boston’s Citi Performing Arts Center Shubert Theatre, 265 Tremont St., Boston. Check for related events. Call 617-542-6772, visit boxoffice@blo.org, blo.org; single tickets, visit blo.org/buy-tickets or call 866-348-9738.

voice blends harmoniously with Very’s, but their love trysts lack intense ardor, a sharp contrast to Varvara and Vanya’s delightful, romantic romps.

As a storm builds, so does Katya’s conscience-ridden torment. She’s haunted again by invisible voices. Filled with hopelessness, Katya confesses

her adultery publicly, sees Boris for a last embrace - his uncle is sending him far away - and drowns herself.

Theatergoers must watch carefully to catch subtle, surprising interactions. The only flaws in this production occur during set changes, as black-out pauses are announced on the monitors.

Unannounced pauses are sometimes accented by lovely musical interludes, but the audience is still left in the dark. Also, a few simplistic translations created ripples of inappropriate laughter during serious scenes.

Regardless, theatergoers’ enthusiastic, prolonged applause evaporate the opera’s gloom.

‘The Taste of Sunrise’

By SHEILA BARTH
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Emerson Stage, Central Square Theater and Wheelock Family Theatre have joined together to present author Suzan Zeder’s The Ware Trilogy. Although I missed Emerson Stage’s production of the first play, “Mother Hicks,” in February, I can’t imagine it could surpass Wheelock’s sensitive, exquisite, poetic performance of “The Taste of Sunrise,” part II of Zeder’s dramatic triptych. The final play, “The Edge of Peace,” will be performed at Central Square Theater in April. They’re interconnected, but each play can stand on its own merit.

For the first time, Zeder’s trilogy is being produced sequentially in one area, enabling theatergoers to progress with the tales of Tuc, a deaf man, outcast Nell Hicks, and a founding girl.

Nell Hicks (Brittany Rolfs), a mysterious woman, cures with singing spells, herbs and potions. The Ware, Ill. villagers think she’s a witch, because whomever she cures ends up afflicted or dead, they say.

In “The Taste of Sunrise,” (directed by Wendy Lement and also Kristin Johnson, who is deaf), we progress with Tuc, from 1917 to 1928, from his infancy, becoming motherless, and being stricken deaf after a bout with scarlet fever, to his becoming an outcast; his experiences at a prestigious deaf school; loss of his father; and his return home.

Patricia Manalo Bochnak’s stunning choreography enhances dramatic scenes.

Although you can’t tell, several ensemble actors, a co-director, co-assistant director and lighting designer are deaf. They blend beautifully with their hearing counterparts in this large cast, including popular Boston stars Cliff Odle, as Tuc’s loving

father; Sirena Abalian and Lewis D. Wheeler, portraying various roles and voices.

Amidst award-winning designer Janie E. Howland’s sun-drenched rustic background and set, the cast ensures every word is captured, with actor-narrators, sign interpreters, and the dialogue and stage direction beamed on the backdrop.

Roger J. Moore’s realistic sound effects and Annie Wiegand’s sensitive lighting capture changes in time, place, and mood.

In the opening scene, we are engulfed in silence. Actors flutter their hands like birds, ripple them like running water, and wave, like the wind. A lone narrator (Ethan Hermanson) speaks from the background, while up-stage, Elbert Joseph, a superlative, deaf, Caribbean-American young actor, owns the spotlight, delivering a gut-wrenching, mesmerizing performance as main character, Jonas “Tuc” Tucker II.

Tuc’s frustration at people’s intolerance, misjudgment, and inability to understand him during his various stages, are disturbing, frightening, evoking our sympathy.

Dr. Alexis Graham, (Donna Sorbello), a well-intended teacher at the School for the Deaf, convinces Tuc’s loving father to let the boy leave his peaceful, verdant surroundings, where he communes with the wind, river, birds, bees, and all forms of na-

ture, to attend the faraway residential school.

Watching Tuc’s fear, isolation and gloom dissipate when he meets Maizie, (Amanda Collins) a teen-age cleaning girl at the school, is heartwarming. Maizie can hear, but her parents are deaf, so she says she is, too, “inside”. She and her parents work menial jobs at the school, but starstruck Maizie loves movies, mentally mingling them with reality, and her hopes for the future.

Tuc’s joy reverberates while playacting with Maizie, fellow student Roscoe (superb deaf actor Matthew J. Schwartz), and his deaf classmates, until Superintendent Dr. Grindly Mann (Daniel Bolton) shatters their fun by admonishing them for using sign language instead of their words. He raps them on the hands with a ruler and imposes stricter discipline on a defiant Roscoe and the followers.

Nevertheless, Tuc flourishes at the school, learning to communicate with his peers. He eagerly returns home for the summer to demonstrate his new skills, but his enthusiasm dissipates - his father can’t understand him. Throughout Tuc and his father’s life changes, Cliff Odle as Jonas Tucker is deeply moving.

Tuc, Nell Hicks, Maizie, and Tucker’s disappointments and losses in their imperfect world are depressing, yet their journey promises hope, a touch - and taste - of sunrise at the end.

BOX OFFICE

Two-act play written by Suzan Zeder, performed in spoken English and American sign language, at Wheelock Family Theatre through March 22, at 180 The Riverway, Boston. Performances: Friday at 7:30 p.m., Saturday and Sunday at 3 p.m. Recommended for adults, teen-agers and children over 9 years old. Tickets, \$20, \$25, \$30; Teens Take-over Fridays, \$15. Call 617-879-2300, visit tickets@wheelock.edu or www.WheelockFamilyTheatre.org.

Crossword Puzzle

ACROSS

- 1 Indian prince
- 6 Letters for auditors
- 10 Agenda component
- 14 Island off Venezuela
- 15 Litter’s littlest
- 16 Long John of the PGA
- 17 Cook’s clock
- 18 Present starter?
- 19 Stage direction
- 20 Tree juice
- 21 Decision to believe
- 24 Long-legged bird
- 26 Setbacks
- 27 Detroit
- 29 Supplication
- 31 Alda or Ladd
- 32 Words of realization
- 34 “The Pirates of Penzance” heroine
- 39 Mother of France
- 40 Works for
- 42 A few
- 43 Houston pro
- 45 Quit it!
- 46 Eight to Yves
- 47 Blackjack tie
- 49 Go-betweens
- 51 Rowling’s hero
- 55 Statistical inclination
- 56 Seasonal restlessness
- 59 Research rm.
- 62 Get better
- 63 Snake-like fish
- 64 Field of action
- 66 Parched
- 67 Identify
- 68 Itemized accounts
- 69 Diminish
- 70 Quick step
- 71 Medicinal portions

DOWN

- 1 Phooey!
- 2 “Stride la vampa,” e.g.
- 3 Dead battery solution
- 4 Vigoda of “Barney Miller”
- 5 “Hell’s Angels” star
- 6 Frog call
- 7 Well adjunct
- 8 Part of A.D.

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- 9 Suppress
- 10 Novel thoughts
- 11 Cabs
- 12 Select group
- 13 Legends
- 22 Sgt. Bilko
- 23 Masses of bubbles
- 25 Skin cream
- 27 Cradle call
- 28 Bravos at the bullring
- 29 Former capital of Scotland
- 30 Late night Jay
- 33 Mouth off
- 35 Pale
- 36 Unlimited
- 37 Give forth
- 38 Oh, why not?
- 41 Trunk tire
- 44 Candid
- 48 Pressing
- 50 Ford or McRaney
- 51 Fiddlesticks!
- 52 La Scala production

- 53 Prepare for the bout
- 54 Spanish diacritical mark
- 55 Boob tube
- 57 Phobia
- 58 Ticklish doll
- 60 Poker stake
- 61 Choir part
- 65 Carnival city, briefly

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