

Frank Parrish Reviews 'TNT' Eminently Worthwhile Theatre

"The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail" teems with peculiarly Thoreauvian ideas, drama, sardonic humor and painfully obvious relevance for contemporary America. Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee have co-authored a literate, insightful play. The Playmakers make "TNT's" Southern premiere an eminently worthwhile evening of theatre.

They handle a unique, idiosyncratic script skillfully, give it the proper dignity and seldom lapse into gratuitous pauses and mouthy posturing. Playwrights Lawrence and Lee are unabashed in their admiration for Thoreau. They surely seek to praise rather than to bury the 19th-century maverick.

"TNT" focuses on Thoreau's stay in the Concord jail for tax debts. Thoreau won't pay taxes which will help to support the war with Mexico. He feels the war is unjust. While Thoreau languishes in jail, his past is cleverly unraveled through a series of flashbacks. Thoreau is seen as student, Emersonian disciple, transcendentalist, teacher-naturalist who goes "huckleberrying for ideas" and ultimately and throughout as unyielding conscience.

As Thoreau leaves jail (it is implied

that his stern, Calvinist Aunt Lucia paid the back taxes), the Mexican war he opposes still continues. Martial airs and a militaristic mood prevail. War may presently be the health of the State. But Thoreau claims neither the State nor its war as his own. Government can only trammel this thoroughgoing individual. Henry David Thoreau can't bear any artificial flowers.

The script by Lawrence and Lee is potent shorthand. Dramatic dialogue necessarily carries limited meanings. Yet, if it is effective dialogue, undeclared meanings or limitless implications permeate a script. And the Playmakers mine the script for most of what it's worth.

"The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail" reminds us that he constantly asked, "how much of what we have can we do without?" Thoreau, in this play, is anti-property, anti-war, opposed to formal education, squarely aligned against marriage and hostile to dubious progress which plunders nature.

Malcolm Groome, who portrays Thoreau, is tireless and powerful in his characterization. His stay on stage is almost unbroken during two relatively

long acts. Whether haranguing Emerson (Philip Whitehill) for his ambivalent stand on the slavery issue or joking with fellow inmate Bailey (Homer Foil), Groome captures the Thoreauvian spirit.

Groome wears the withering glance of an uncompromising moralist comfortably. His gestures match a fierce countenance. Or he whimsically says, "I think I'll think for awhile. That will be a change from college."

Laughing or outraged, Groome is well-suited for the part. There are some rare moments when the strain of being constantly on stage shows. Then, Groome is understated or unnatural. For the most part, though, the part wears well. He runs an emotional gamut marvelously and emerges triumphantly on the other side. He makes Thoreau human rather than other-worldly. His performance is mostly excellent and wholly believable.

The counterpoint to Thoreau's brilliance is Bailey who has been jailed for vagrancy. He is dull-witted, quizzical and incredulous before Thoreau's eloquence. Homer Foil plays Bailey and invests the role with comedic value. He is the rustic innocent and a good one. Foil as Bailey delivers a wealth of quips.

For example: Thoreau—"Did you ever make friends with a loon?" Bailey—"Not until tonight!"

If Bailey is a bumbling, good-natured illiterate, Waldo is his bookish articulate opposite. He is also Thoreau's mentor and sometime idol. Philip Whitehill's resonant voice matches Waldo or Emerson admirably. He never misses a honeyed syllable.

Deborah Bloodworth, as Emerson's wife, should be all New England propriety but is a trifle unconvincing. Jean Spearman, who plays Thoreau's mother, is sufficiently put-upon and vexed by her son's stubborn individuality. Mary Key portrays Ellen Sewell, sweetheart of both Henry and John Thoreau. She is demure, restrained, occasionally wide-eyed and splendid in the role.

Skip Lefler, as John Thoreau, comes off stiffly. However he does show an occasional glimpse of credibility. Mitch Douglas, as Deacon Ball, vents enough spleen to make an excellent martinet.

Elliott Moffitt is Williams, a fugitive slave. He manages to look haggard, hungry and yes—fugitive. Constable Sam Staples, who arrests Thoreau, seems to be the proverbial "good ol' boy." Joel Ballard has the part and sometimes acts

too nonchalant, even for an easygoing lawman.

Make no mistake though. "The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail" has a fine cast. It is treating a script carrying a full cargo of messages, both pertinent and absorbing. Thomas M. Patterson directed the production and apparently exercised good judgment and necessary control.

"TNT" virtually explodes in your face. The parallels with today are easy to draw. Thoreau has been imprisoned for his beliefs. The war with Mexico looks like an expansionist adventure to him. And Thoreau, above all, asserts the individual's

primacy over the State, over all of "civilization's" accoutrements. At one point, Groome as Thoreau frantically exhorts his fellow Concordians to "Simplify! Simplify!"

"The Night Thoreau Spent in Jail" augurs well for the upcoming Playmaker season. The messages are sometimes blunt but the cast generally gives them impressive readings. A special show is scheduled for Monday at 8 o'clock. It was well-earned. Spend a night with Thoreau, in and out of jail. You may forget clocks, appointments and lives of "quiet desperation."

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