

To Kill a Mockingbird

September 2005

What can I say about this amazing experience that was *To Kill a Mockingbird*?

Brave New World did a reading of the play back in May – a rainy afternoon in the back yard of Claire & John (2 of the 3 artistic directors). They were following their dream and raising money. They asked me to play Horace Gilmer, the prosecuting attorney.

Jump to September: with 2 weeks of rehearsal– we set sail for a one-night-only extravaganza. As you may know the play was performed on the porches and sidewalks of 6 Victorian homes in a beautiful old section of Brooklyn. Ditmas Park is the area's name. These 100+ year homes are the big, hulking kind in *Sophie's Choice* (which was shot nearby). They all have 6-8 bedrooms, are 2 tall stories high, plus the basement and attic (often with a picturesque spire with window). They all have great porches of varying degrees of wrap-aroundness. The houses are unique and are set on smallish plots lining quaint roads with 100 year old trees.

Claire, our director/captain/inspiration/cheerleader, worked with the kids for months. Her daughter Taylor played Scout (beautifully). All the kids were really quite wonderful -- playful, still children – not that “actory” style that kids can have.

The audience was to sit on rented chairs in the street – stretching their necks to see each of the 6 housefuls of action. The free event was part theatre, part “watching a film being shot” and part radio show – for with our body mics they could clearly hear whatever they couldn't see.

With an order for 300 chairs the publicity machine started and we began to rehearse – outdoors, in the yards and porches. After an article & photo in The New York Times, other publications were quick to be interested: NY Magazine, Time Out NY, Daily News and all of the Brooklyn papers. They quickly upped the chair order to 500. The company website was getting quite a few hits, emails and phone calls were pouring in. The chair order rose to 750. But would 750 New Yorkers really go to Brooklyn on a Sunday night to see a play version of a classic novel/movie?

The big day – Sunday, September 18th. At 6 a.m. the street was closed to through traffic. After daylight, the technical equipment arrived. The crew constructed a pipe to hang lighting and sound equipment – gently attaching it to the 100 year old sycamore trees.

Cast members arrived at noon to a sight that can only be described as a film set. Cables and equipment all over the street, sidewalk and lawn of the main house (doubling for the Finch's house and the courtroom). About 100 of the chairs had been arranged in the street for our invited dress rehearsal.

The attic of the main house became costume-central. The company of 25+ climbed into the 1935 clothes and awaited our first run through with microphones (body mics and area mics for the porches), costumes and a small invited audience (a 10th grade class from Brooklyn).

The students were very attentive. Laughing in all the right places. Even heckling Bob Ewell, the racist, child-abusing father of the “victim.” When the judge tells him to sit down or he’ll be held in contempt. “That’s right!” was heard from the audience.

The run went well... but the real opening and closing performance was yet to come. We had never run the show with the lighting. We’d never seen the lighting. Nor had the lighting designer – as there had never been darkness since the equipment was set up. So many things could go wrong? How would the kids handle an audience? Would people come? Would it rain? A lot of “what happens if....”

We broke for dinner and all tried to rest and appear casual for what lay ahead.

I came back from getting a sandwich from a street fair down the block to find two things: 1) the street now had several hundred chairs set up; and 2) a pair of police officers were having a heated discussion with Claire on the front lawn.

Turns out that the police demanded that the company leave a lane open on the street for the fire department. That would have cut the size of the audience in half. It didn’t make sense to me to have a street half full of people and allow a truck to speed down the other half. Quick thinking, fast moving Claire managed to have a 3 way conference call (remember this is a Sunday evening) between the Brooklyn Arts Council president, the Brooklyn Borough President, Marty Markowitz and the Brooklyn chief of police. These heavy-hitters discussed the second lane of Westminister Road and... decided the play must go on – with all of the street! One victory for the arts! Frantically the volunteer army begin setting up the remaining 300 chairs. 750 is a lot of chairs to fill the street. The “curtain” is held. We looked down both ends of the block. Both have lines forming. Long lines. Blocks worth. Friends started calling and texting the cast to see what the hold up was, “I’m in line, but it’s not moving – it’s a long line!” “I’m here, I just can’t get in.”

Our director had to address the crowd when it became painfully clear that there were more people than seats. Lots more. People naturally filled sidewalks and adjacent lawns – trouble was – those spaces were the playing area. “See that tire swing – kids will be swinging on it.”

Claire was great – she told the overflowing audience that she wished she could move the houses back to make more room. She wished she had blankets for all those sitting on the ground. After all the nooks and crannies of available space had been filed – people had to be turned away. Several hundred people had to be asked to leave. Many of whom were understandably not happy.

So 30 minutes after curtain time – we began the show with more people than Westminister Road had ever seen. People everywhere. Many standing, kids on parents’ shoulders, many sprawled on the street and the sidewalks. From the opening strains of Billie Holliday “What It’s Like to Miss New Orleans” the crowd was rapt. A young girl plays on a tire swing, the Finch’s housekeeper calls through the screen door “Scout? Where are you Scout?” The grown up Scout crosses the lawn and begins to narrate her story.

Part theatre, part film, part radio show. All magic. I can't remember ever seeing such a large crowd be so quiet and attentive. Did I mention the weather was PERFECT! After weeks of heat and very high humidity the theatre gods were on our side – low humidity and a cool breeze. AND a glorious full moon (which is mentioned in the last minutes of the play).

The audience laughed. They cheered. The first act ended with the woeful song Strange Fruit - Billie again. During the intermission borough president Marty Markowitz offered a short speech championing Brave New World and encouraging support for the arts in Brooklyn (no mention of saving the day from the eager policemen).

Act 2 began with the continuation of the trial. When, as the prosecutor, I cross examined Tom --the poor, black, falsely-accused man -- my explosive use of the word “boy” echoed through Flatbush. How could we treat each other like this? Audible gasps were heard when the verdict was read. Many people remember the movie and how wonderful Gregory Peck was – how great a man Atticus Finch is – they forget that he didn't actually win the case. The black townspeople who were across the street in the “balcony” watching the trial see Atticus, alone, leaving. The Reverend speaks “Stand up. Stand up, Miss Jean Louis. Your father's passing.” And the amazing voice of one of the black spectators launches into “Motherless Child.” Cue the tissues.

The play reminds us of how wonderfully Harper Lee wove the morals and values of the town and the times with the coming of age of the Finch kids. And just how noble Atticus was and how victorious he was to get the town to take a tiny step toward justice.

In the final moments of the play... after the revengeful Bob Ewell has attacked the kids with a knife – only to be saved by the mysterious Boo Radley... Atticus thanks Boo, “Thank you, Arthur – thank you for my children.” Then he takes Scout inside to stand watch at his injured son Jem's bedside. A beautiful silhouette fills the porch window as the lights fade out.

The instant standing ovation was amazing. Hundreds of wet-faced people standing and applauding this timely story and a troupe of Brave New World actors. The judge and jury bow; the spectators bow; the ladies of Maycomb bow; the witnesses bow; the sheriff and prosecutor bow; the grown-up Scout/narrator bows; the kids bow: Dill, Jem and Scout (the volume is excitedly deafening); then Atticus bows. Followed by repeated, fully-sustained bows from the whole company, under full-moonlight.

The police estimate that the crowd was 2,400 people – more than filling the 750 chairs. With 400-600 people regrettably turned away. Close to 3,000 people came to see the show!

To think this all began when Claire took her coffee out on her front porch, contemplating what show to do... *To Kill a Mockingbird*? But where? ... “We could do it... here. Right here.”

How lucky I was to participate in this magical, one-time-only, special evening of theatre. And in Brooklyn – who knew?

By Gary Cowling