



## *This Happy Breed*

Interview with Director Nick Bowling

**TimeLine's Artistic Director PJ Powers (PP) recently chatted with director Nick Bowling (NB) about TimeLine's production of *This Happy Breed*.**

*(PP) What were your first impressions of This Happy Breed when you read it?*

**(NB) I didn't think I was going to like it at all, but I was so emotionally drawn into the play on my first read that I finished it in one sitting and I cried twice. I have been quoted so many times saying this about the play that I'm afraid people will think I'm a crybaby. I don't cry easily ...especially when it comes to *reading* plays. (Now commercials are something else all together.) But that's what made it so special and what I responded to. When I talked with the company about the play, we all agreed that considering the plays I've directed for TimeLine in the past, it might be a nice change to direct one that affected me on more an emotional level than an intellectual.**

*(PP) Yes, TimeLine audiences have come to know you for directing plays like Hauptmann, The Crucible, Gaslight and The Lion in Winter. And I heard you mention at the first rehearsal for This Happy Breed that this is the first time in awhile that you have worked on a play that is more of the heart than of the mind. What did you mean by that?*

**(NB) My mentor, Joe Slowik (a teacher of mine at The Theatre School at DePaul University) always tells me to go for the plays that examines human values, that touch on what is inextricably human and of the heart and soul rather than the conceptual or that which really challenges the mind. Of course it would be great to work on something that does both (as I think this play does) but the emphasis of *This Happy Breed* is on the emotional and the human. Joe recently told me that "the heart goes to places the brain can't penetrate." I loved that and I think he's right.**

*(PP) You've had experience working on other Noel Coward plays. How is this different?*

**(NB) I directed *Blithe Spirit* a few years ago and one of the "Coarse Acting" take-offs of Coward, but *This Happy Breed* is something very different. I recognized Coward's skill with characterization, language, pacing and humor...but he is really speaking through these characters without any artifice. His politics and social commentary are unveiled and presented in a real middle-class way. The characters in his other plays are rich and complex, but actors found it difficult to dig deep inside them. These characters beg to be revealed and have proven an endless well for examination.**

*(PP) Before coming to Chicago in 1993 so much of your background was in musical theatre. How do you think that work has influenced your work on straight plays and classics like This Happy Breed?*

**(NB) I've actually had to unlearn much of what I knew about the theatre because of my musical theatre background. Musicals usually allow less of the organic (which straight theatre must have.) I have a wonderful sense of timing and style and an ability to block (and choreograph), but I have to stop myself sometimes from fixing things too much for fear that an organic moment will become stale.**

*(PP) Why do you think that this is the right time to re-visit an old play like This Happy Breed?*

**(NB) I think it's always a good time to revisit a play that has an important message, that affects an audience and that teaches us something about people from another place and time.**

**Also, this is a play that is very important to us right now. It is an examination of people on the verge of war. Coward at times sounds like a billboard for the Bush war agenda. In fact, the play is really a call for moderation in a time of volatile extremes. He was against appeasement, but for me, his play is all about appeasement. It is about the need to examine an issue, see both sides of it and then come down firmly on one. This is shown on two scales in this production. The big scale is represented by videos that tell the stories of the many treaties and pacts during the years between the wars and the small scale is seen from inside the Gibbons family as they learn to understand, accept and love each other.**

**These are issues of our own country today. Our Democratic party has the ability to see both sides, but an inability to come down squarely on one. Republicans are so firmly planted on the right that they are unable to see any other point of view.**

*(PP) We spoke with members of the Noel Coward estate and members of the Noel Coward Society, and they said that they have only seen this play done 2 or 3 times in their lives. Why do you think that it is so rarely produced?*

**(NB) It is a challenging play for many reasons. It tries to capture 20 years of a family. This is very difficult to do in the theatre – it means many fast costume and hair changes for 12 actors. It also means that much of the story will have to be abbreviated and marriages and deaths will take place without us seeing them. It is also difficult for modern audiences to understand many parts of the history of the play – because his audience was much more familiar with it.**

**We have done everything we can to help clarify the abbreviations and I think Nicole Burchfield (Costume Designer) has done an amazing job clothing these characters throughout the many years. We added video to help make the period events come to life for the audience.**

*(PP) With such a large cast that includes 12 fantastic roles, what was the casting process like for you and how important was casting to the outcome of the production?*

(NB) It is always the most important factor of my job. I think sometimes good casting is half skill, half luck. I got very lucky this time. These actors have great chemistry and I had an amazing time working with them. Actually you did the toughest part of the casting job by finding me excellent choices for all of these roles. Thanks, by the way.

*(PP) Yeah, no sweat. Now, anyone who is familiar with your work knows that design elements are such a major factor in your productions. For This Happy Breed, you've taken a play that was clearly intended for a proscenium stage and made the bold choice to stage it in-the-round at TimeLine. It's a gamble that, I think, pays off beautifully, but what first led you to that choice?*

**(NB) It was the *Richard II* quote by Shakespeare that initially led me to the idea that the room in the Gibbons house should be like an island in the middle of the space:**

“This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd isle,  
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,  
This other Eden, demi-paradise,  
This fortress built by Nature for herself  
Against infection and the hand of war,  
This happy breed of men, this little world,  
The precious stone set in the silver sea,  
Which serves it in the office of a wall,  
Or as a moat defensive to a house,  
Against the envy of less happy lands,  
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England...”  
—William Shakespeare, *Richard II*

**Tom Burch (Set Designer) and I talked a lot about different options and we both kept coming back to the round. Also Jennifer Shook (Dramaturg) told me that the period between the wars (when the play is set) was often called the “island of peace.” I took all of this as sign and I think it really works.**

*(PP) Another aspect of the show that goes against how the play was originally produced is your use of short films that are projected during the scene changes. How did that come into the production?*

**(NB) I knew the audience needed some help with the events that occurred during the war and were being referenced in the play (I know I did) and video just seemed the logical answer. I also wanted to cover the major scene changes that would be necessary to the production with something interesting.**

*(PP) Was there anything that really surprised you during the rehearsal process for the show – anything significant that you didn't know when you began working on the play?*

**(NB) During the pre-rehearsal process I found out that each of the nine scenes of the play are connected to a major event in British history and I hadn't realize that at first. Many are obvious in the play, but some have only very subtle connections to the scenes.**

*(PP)* As the founding Artistic Director of TimeLine in 1997, it was largely your idea to build a company that focused on exploring history. Now TimeLine is in its eighth season, and you have directed 7 of our productions. What are your thoughts on the company's evolution, particularly in regards to this mission focused on history?

**(NB) I loved the mission back then and I continue to love it. It has not always been easy to find plays that stay within the guidelines of the mission, but it is what makes the theatre unique. TimeLine has continued to not only provoke the minds and affect the hearts of its audiences, it has also sought to teach and explore history. And best of all for me is how much I've learned by working on these plays. I think we made a great decision 8 years ago.**

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