

One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest: Madness Is Divinest Sense



Poet Emily Dickinson, who was more than a little odd herself, noted that madness is what society ascribes to those who do not conform: “Assent, and you are sane ;/Demur, — you’re straightway dangerous,/And handled with a chain.” There are, I would argue, three great novels that better than any others captured this theme for the 1960s: *Slaughterhouse Five* by Kurt Vonnegut, *Catch-22* by Joseph Heller, and *One Flew over the Cuckoo's Nest* by Ken Kesey. The first two are set in the metaphorical madhouse of war, but the last is set in a literal madhouse where patients surrender their individuality to a repressive regime of a mental hospital theoretically trying to “cure” them.

In Kesey’s 1962 novel, many of the patients are not what we would today regard as mentally ill at all. This important point was preserved but minimized for the 1963 stage play and was nearly completely sanitized out of the 1975 film version. The version presented by Attleboro Community Theatre is a 1971 revision of the 1963 play, adapted for a smaller cast.

The stage versions follow considerably more closely to the book than does the movie, and Kesey claimed until his death in 2001 that he refused to see the movie because he disagreed with not having “Chief Bromden” (Doug MacAskill) narrate the action. Bromden, the six-and-a-half foot tall son of a Native American Indian chief and a white woman, serves as the reader’s proxy in the novel: He feigns an inability to hear or speak and this gives him freedom to observe without being bothered by anyone, including the staff who assume he cannot know what they say. His internal monologue often addresses his deceased father who was emasculated by his wife, becoming an alcoholic and forcing him to take her surname, Bromden, in place of his own, Tee Ah Millatoona, which is said to mean “The Pine That Stands Tallest on the Mountain.”

Bromden becomes convinced that he and his late father are victims of “The Combine,” an indistinct but ubiquitous conspiracy to strip away dignity and individuality while turning people into machines, as in the government that forced his father to sell tribal lands and move away. As he eventually explains in

the play, "That's what the government guy said, here's a whole big pot of money. And Papa said, what can you pay for the way a man lives? What can you pay for his right to be an Indian? He didn't understand. Neither did the tribe. They stood in front of our door, holdin' those checks, askin' what should we do now?" The inescapable irony is that his seeming paranoia about "The Combine" proves substantially true.

"Dale Harding" (Stephen G. Lee) is an intelligent and refined man, something of a leader among the patients, who has voluntarily committed himself due to his homosexuality that, for obvious reasons, displeases his wife. (In the film, he's more paranoid than gay.) "Billy Bibbit" (Bob Lively) is a young man pathologically anxious due to sex guilt resulting from his domineering mother interfering with his normal and healthy interest in girls, leading to stuttering and self-harm. "Scanlon" (Brandon Harrington) carries a box containing what he intends and believes will allow him to build "a bomb - to blow up the whole stinkin' world." "Cheswick" (John Campbell) complains about everything but does little. "Martini" (Alex Aponte) experiences hallucinations. "Ruckly" (Charley Carey) has been rendered a vegetable by lobotomy, spending much of his time nailed to the wall in a crucifixion pose.

The staff consists of stupid and cruel orderlies "Williams" (Robert P. Messier) and "Warren" (Kevin Hernandez), the ineffectual psychiatrist "Dr. Spivey" (W. Grant Willis), "Nurse Flinn" (Sarah Quintiliani) who is a very timid and fearful Catholic, and "Nurse Ratched" (Anne Faeiella) who runs the ward with military precision.

Into this environment enters "Randle P. 'Mac' McMurphy" (Roger Campbell), committed by the court as a "psychopath" for what he mistakenly expects to be a more pleasant time than a six-month sentence on a penal work farm. Having lived by his wits for the most part on the wrong side of the law, running gambling games and the like, Mac instinctively senses that the residents of the all-male ward are as emasculated as Chief Bromden's late father, in this case by Nurse Ratched who viciously shames and manipulates them into conformity by exploiting their weak points and guilt. In particular, she threatens to tell Billy's mother about his "misbehavior," the two women - Ratched and his mother - combining forces to repress his natural sexual urges so effectively that he is still a virgin in his 30s. By refusing to be emasculated, Mac sets himself up to challenge Nurse Ratched's authority, first over minor issues such as changing the television watching times to be able to see the World Series. Eventually Mac smuggles in liquor and prostitutes "Candy Starr" (Emily Lamarre) and "Sandra" (Denise Roberge) - feminine antidotes for the puritanical femininity of Ratched, Flinn, and Billy's mother - for a wild party, promising to end Billy's virginity.

The 1970s film version of *Cuckoo's Nest* is so well known, one of the very few in history to win all five major Oscars (Best Picture, Actor in Lead Role, Actress in Lead Role, Director, and Screenplay) in its year of eligibility, that it has come to eclipse the original novel. While the film is unquestionably excellent on its own terms, it emphasizes the personal conflict between McMurphy and Nurse Ratched to the extent of driving out other themes. By following the novel more closely, the stage version is a more faithful and (as noted) far less sanitized capturing of the 1960s *zeitgeist*, especially that many of the patients are mentally ill as a coping mechanism for unfair treatment by society: Dale Harding because he is gay in an era when that made him an outcast and a criminal, Billy Bibbit because he has the normal sexual desires of a young man but is made to repress them and feel hopeless guilt, Chief Bromden because he and his Native American people were stripped of their land and turned into despairing alcoholics. To its credit, Attleboro's stage production is very much not the film.

Director David Blessinger made wise choices in staging *Cuckoo's Nest* on two levels and creating

distinct spaces, one more intimate with the audience where much of the action with the patients takes place and the other more removed where much of the action with the staff takes place. Two particularly interesting casting choices were Faiella, according to the program in real life a nurse for 44 years, as Nurse Ratched and Willis, in real life a URI psychology professor, as Dr. Spivey. Some of the supporting cast are very good, notably Aponte as Mancini whose hallucinations sometimes cleverly allow him to “see” the audience through the fourth wall, perfectly meshing with the theme of the insanity of the patients often arising out of their struggles to stay sane in impossible circumstances and thereby giving them insight to greater truth. Lively as Bibbit and Lee as Harding carry difficult roles well, especially as the former must affect a stutter that increases in intensity with his state of submission to Ratched. Of necessity, however, the play belongs to Faiella who manages just the right sneer as Ratched, to R. Campbell who demonstrates irrepressible excitement as McMurphy, and to MacAskill who literally rises to the occasion as the giant Bromden.

One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest is very much in keeping with cerebral and intellectually challenging productions from Attleboro Community Theatre, such as *The Man from Earth* last season. The novel and play are with their greater focus on Bromden considerably more optimistic in tone than the film. It’s an excellent and well-acted production.

One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest, directed by David Blessinger, Attleboro Community Theatre, performances at Ezekiel Bates Masonic Lodge, 71 N. Main St., Attleboro, MA, Fri (10/7, 10/14) and Sat (10/8, 10/15) 8pm, Sun (10/9, 10/16) 2pm. About 2h including 20m intermission. E-mail: attleborocommunitytheatreACT@gmail.com Web site: attleborocommunitytheatre.com; Facebook event: facebook.com/events/1655085108154197/ Tickets: squareup.com/market/acttickets