

THEATER

THEATER; Surviving Brooklyn, and Finding a Voice Far Away

By Steven Leigh Morris

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THOUGH he has been a playwright throughout his adult life, Murray Mednick, 63, has never much craved attention or applause. You might say he has actively avoided both.

Despite living in Los Angeles since he immigrated from Brooklyn in 1974, Mr. Mednick has mostly sidestepped the film and television industries and traditional theatrical shipping lanes in order to devote his energies to writing and promoting introspective, poetical stage plays. And while he has grown increasingly interested lately in "the sound and rhythm and the beauty of the language," as he put it, at the expense of scene settings and even characters,

about 10 years ago he fixated on his Jewish roots. The result was three rather accessible domestic plays with clipped vernacular dialogue and tinges of absurdism, two of which have found their way to New York.

Take "Joe and Betty," Mr. Mednick's gruesomely humorous drama that opened last Sunday at the Kirk Theater, after its New York premiere at the José Quintero Theater in June. The play, set in 1951, recalls Mr. Mednick's parents, mired in poverty and mutual loathing after their move to the Catskills from Brooklyn in 1945. Emile, an offstage, lice-ridden 11-year-old stand-in for Mr. Mednick, watches his parents destroy each other, their truncated repartee flaunting the Jewish cadences of a comedy by Neil Simon but without the rim shots. The effect is that of a merciless study in human implosion. (John Diehl and Annabelle Gurwitch are repeating their title roles in the current run.)

Yet in his review in The New York Times, Bruce Weber reported some bright shimmers in Mr. Mednick's black play. "A harrowing, deeply distressing and memorable, if not exactly enjoyable, comedy," Mr. Weber said, "it is reclaimed from pure, discomfiting grimness by the evidence that the author survived his childhood to write about it with such cleansing vengeance."

Mr. Mednick attributes that survival to his bountiful "big bubba" grandmother Celia, a cook in the school he attended, to whom he dedicated "Joe and Betty." "She took care of me and gave me enough love so I was able to have some element of sanity," Mr. Mednick said in one of several interviews in Los Angeles. And sanity was hard to come by in the Mednick family.

Mr. Mednick's uncle was committed to a mental hospital as a child. A photograph taken during a visit by Mr. Mednick's mother to her brother inspired "16 Routines," a series of strategically pointless vaudeville sketches between two former partners. It is the second play in Mr. Mednick's trilogy about his past,

following "Joe and Betty." The third, "Mrs. Feuerstein," involves the revenge of the title character, a teacher at an East Coast boarding school and possible Holocaust survivor. It was presented in New York at the Chashama Theater in 2001.

All three plays were performed at last year's first season of Padua Playwrights Productions in Los Angeles. The company is headed by Guy Zimmerman (who is directing "Joe and Betty") and was inspired by the Padua Hills Playwrights Workshop, which Mr. Mednick established in 1978 while teaching at La Verne College, 40 miles east of Los Angeles, near the foothills of the San Gabriel Mountains.

A Whitmanesque summer camp for playwrights that existed at various outdoor locales for 17 years, the workshop served the dramatists Sam Shepard, David Henry Hwang, Jon Robin Baitz, Maria Irene Fornes, John O'Keefe, John Stepping, Eduardo Machado and Kelly Stuart, among others. It was there that Mr. Mednick created "The Coyote Cycle," a play in seven parts, meant to be performed from twilight to dawn outdoors (often with actors in trees), that incorporates Native American folklore in an attempt to find a deeper mythology than those that inform most plays and films.

In his time at Padua Hills, from 1981 to 1984, Mr. Baitz said, he kept returning to the workshop's classes. Though he might not have fully understand Mr. Mednick's esoteric "Coyote" cycle at the time, Mr. Baitz said: "The one thing I did understand was how singular Murray was. He was a real representation of an opposite L.A. -- one that wasn't a bloated Cinerama fiasco."

The idea behind the workshop was an extension of Mr. Mednick's collaborations at the Genesis Theater in New York with his mentor, the director Ralph Cook, who staged every play Mr. Mednick wrote between 1965 and 1972. (These early

plays are characterized by depictions of violence, including "Sand" in 1967, about an American soldier returning from the Vietnam war, hanging from a meat hook, and "The Hawk" in 1970, about a drug dealer who kills women.) Mr. Mednick's goal at Padua Hills was a theater dedicated to nurturing writers as artists rather than to developing plays as products.

A recipient of two Rockefeller fellowships, Mr. Mednick might have remained in New York had he not been evicted from his Brooklyn apartment while in the Yucatán on a Guggenheim grant. Mr. Shepard offered refuge in Nova Scotia until Mr. Mednick was invited by the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles to adapt "The Oresteia" by Euripides.

But perhaps it is not surprising that he would decide to make his home far from the scenes of his childhood. His parents eventually divorced. His father, who remarried, died in 1987. His mother is still in the Catskills, but Mr. Mednick said he had little contact with her. He lives in Santa Monica with his second wife, Christina Singleton Mednick, and their 7-year-old daughter, Celene, whom they adopted from China as an infant.

The gentleness in Mr. Mednick's eyes belies the sometimes pained seriousness of his expression, which some might trace to a lifetime of challenging commercial standards of success. "There are many successful plays that aren't very good," Mr. Mednick said softly. "And there are many good plays that aren't very successful. Those are the ones we have to stand up for."

Joe and Betty

Kirk Theater, 410 West 42nd Street.

Through Jan. 12.

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