

VIEWS and REVIEWS

Melville Slept Here

by Norman Allen

Directed by Margaret Van Sant
at The Provincetown Inn

Reviewed by Roger Chauvette

After an incredibly rich summer season for Provincetown theater in general, most of us have half prepared to lay back and begin reminiscing, but hold onto you programs and your theatrical mindsets, because it isn't over yet. The Provincetown Theatre Company has a sleeper hit on its hands with *Melville Slept Here* by Norman Allen.

Some of you may recall Norman Allen, a resident of Washington, DC who spent time here in Provincetown between 1989 and 1992 as he dreamt of changing career from a public relations man to playwright. He carried out this incubation period with the help of the PTC during which time he wrote *Here To Stay* and *Jenny Saint Joan*.

Mr. Allen is currently playwright-in-residence at DC's Signature Theatre where his many production credits include the world premieres of *Nijinsky's Last Dance* (Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Play) and *Melville Slept Here* (Charles MacArthur Award Nomination). As Co-Director of Signature in The Schools, he has also won a Washington Post Award for Distinguished Community Service. But back to *Melville*.

The stylized set represents the historical home in Wellfleet of a deceased Captain Biddle, graced with long wall hangings by Hilda Neily, Pasquale Natale and Michael Casey as designed by Anthony Jackman. To the left we find the bedroom, center stage the main common room/foyer and to the right a corner of the garden. The actors, under Bart Murell's choreography move effortlessly from one location to the other making great use of the entire stage. Tony's lighting and David Maddox's sound track weave in and out of the action inconspicuously moving the story along without drawing attention to themselves.

In a nutshell, Dwayne (Nick Harris) and his wife Emma (Lynda Sturner) have been hired by Mrs Biddle (Robin Howard) and her daughter Elise (Caitlin Gibbon) to manage an old guest house in Wellfleet, but the first guest, the ghost of 150-year-old Captain Harcourt (John Lescault) was not expected to come with the deal. He can only be seen by Emma and Dwayne on whom he imposes the burden of setting history right.

Lynda Sturner, a new face for PTC regulars has a strong background in directing, acting, teaching and playwriting, ably creates an Emma who can easily live with ghosts if not with their agendas. She shines in her attempt to conduct a tour of the house with constant interruptions by the Captain who keeps putting in his two-cents. In scenes with her husband, she communicates warmth and poise, even under pressure. (Ms Sturner is past president of New York's League of Professional Theatre Women.)

Nick Harris, having played the ghost of John Barrymore this past summer in *I Hate Hamlet* now sees a ghost. Captain Harcourt confides in him more information about the history of the house than he ever cared to know. As the story takes one unexpected turn after

another, Mr Harris easily flows from one situation to another bringing life to Dwayne.

John Lescault, perhaps the most dashing ghost we've seen in years, commands the scene whenever he appears. He'll make a believer in the post-living out of anyone who has ever doubted, but do not be afraid, he does it with style and humor and drama when needed. (He has performed with 15 or more theatre companies—including Provincetown—and serves as a narrator for the Talking Books Program of the Library of Congress.)

Caitlin Gibbon, a co-founder of the Tidal Theater Company and a budding producer herself, brings a beautiful love-hate relationship to the role of Elise Biddle who does not see ghosts, demands perfect behavior from the innkeepers and dreams of putting up condos on the property to honor her spotless Biddle heritage. Caitlin literally "bounces" gracefully around the stage with classical ghostly interaction.

Robin Howard, a member of the Actor's Studio with a prolific background in London, New York and regional theater including the Provincetown playhouse, portrays a delightful Mrs. Biddle, mother to Elise and owner of the property, does not have the same kind of commitment to preservation (Biddle by marriage), but prefers life among the living, allowing her to express her eccentricity with flair. Her bubbling performance makes you want to find that inn and stay with her for a spell.

Finally, a key element of the story, Keith Amato brings life to a second ghost, a seaman called Jack who was also an intimate friend of Captain Harcourt. His appearance in a dreamlike sequence sets the tone for the whole unrolling of the story.

Tying the two tales together would have been difficult under usual circumstances, but Edward Baker's wonderful costumes successfully help the audience move from past to present with ease. This reviewer particularly enjoyed the dream sequence which combined costume, lighting, sound and a dramatic moment when Captain Harcourt and Jack first met while Dwayne and Emma stand in the background.

The story ends all too soon leaving the audience wanting more story, more characters and more of Biddle House. The ending begs for a sequel with ghosts returning to the inn. Hopefully Mr. Allen will accommodate us down the line.

Meanwhile, make time to take in *Melville Slept Here* and prepare yourself for a fun evening; not belly laughs, but a perfect event for this time of year. What a great beginning for PTC's Playwright's Festival within Provincetown's Fall Festival of the Arts! The play continues this weekend until October 3rd with the exception of Saturday night October 2nd when there will not be a performance. Tickets are available at the door \$15. or through Provincetown Reservations at 487-2400.



Mystery – and laughs – pervade a seaside inn

By **LESLIE MEIER**
STAFF WRITER

If you took "The Ghost and Mrs. Muir" and crossed it with "Peyton Place," then added a dash of Oscar Wilde, you'd have something like Norman Allen's "Melville Slept Here," the witty and entertaining production that is leading off the Provincetown Theatre Company's Playwrights Festival.

The festival will continue through Oct. 3 and features works by playwrights the company has helped develop. "Melville Slept Here," which is set in Wellfleet, grew out of readings in Provincetown.

The play begins on a dark and stormy night with a cozy game of Trivial Pursuit in the historic Biddle House. Two of the players are Dwayne and Emma Stevenson, caretakers of the house, played by Nick Harris and Lynda Sturner; the third is the ghost of Captain Harcourt, played by John Lescault.

On Stage

- **What:** "Melville Slept Here"
- **Presented by:** Provincetown Playwrights Festival
- **Written by:** Norman Allen
- **Directed by:** Margaret Van Sant
- **When:** 8 p.m. Sept. 24-26 and 30 and Oct. 1, and 2 p.m. Oct. 3
- **Where:** Provincetown Inn, 1 Commercial St.
- **Tickets:** \$12, \$15 and \$25
- **Reservations:** 487-2400

The Stevensons are fascinated by the Captain, who died around 1860 and is full of gossipy information about the luminaries of his time. He is less forthcoming, however, about the mysterious incident that requires him to haunt the house. Lescault is absolutely perfect in the role of the Captain, whether he is tossing off a wisecrack or reciting a hefty quote

from a classic by Melville, Hawthorne or Shakespeare.

The Stevensons, a bookish couple in their fifties, have secrets of their own and are reluctant to reveal why they came to Biddle House. Harris is natural and comfortable as Dwayne, a historian who is obsessed with discovering the truth about centuries-old events. Sturner is adorable as Emma, his concerned wife, and has a natural talent for comedy. A scene in which she tries to give a tour of the historic house, despite the interference of the ghostly Captain, is hysterically funny.

The villain of the piece is Elise Biddle, played to bitchy perfection by Caitlin Gibbon. Elise plans to construct "authentic 19th century" condominiums on the family property. Robin Howard offers comic relief in the form of Mrs. Biddle, a woman who is enjoying life as a survivor. "Widowhood – now that's something to write home about," she declares. Completing the cast is a second ghost, Jack, played with great sensi-

tivity by Keith Amato.

The production is enhanced by Edward Baker's costume design and Anthony Jackman's simple but effective set design. David Maddox's sound design is extremely well done, including the sound of waves, gentle flute music and ghostly cries that gradually become louder and ultimately reveal the truth about the Biddles.

While the first act of the play positively zips along, enlivened with lots of wit and comedy as the tension of the plot develops, the second act is a bit of a let down. The plot takes a serious turn, it's true, but events don't justify the Captain losing his sense of humor and becoming a pop psychologist. The final encounter between Elise and the Captain also needs to be more confrontational; Elise is not the kind of girl to give up without a struggle.

These are minor quibbles to be sure. "Melville Slept Here" is a terrific tale and deserves to become a classic in its own right.

Theater
REVIEW

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“Melville Slept Here” is an eye-opener

By Sue Harrison
BANNER STAFF

The Provincetown Theater Company's production of “Melville Slept Here,” by Norman Allen, conjures up the past, as a ghost steps in to take charge of the present and forever changes the future lives of four people connected to a historic Wellfleet home. It also entertains, challenges assumptions and even leaves a little existential questioning of one's own life when the final scene fades.

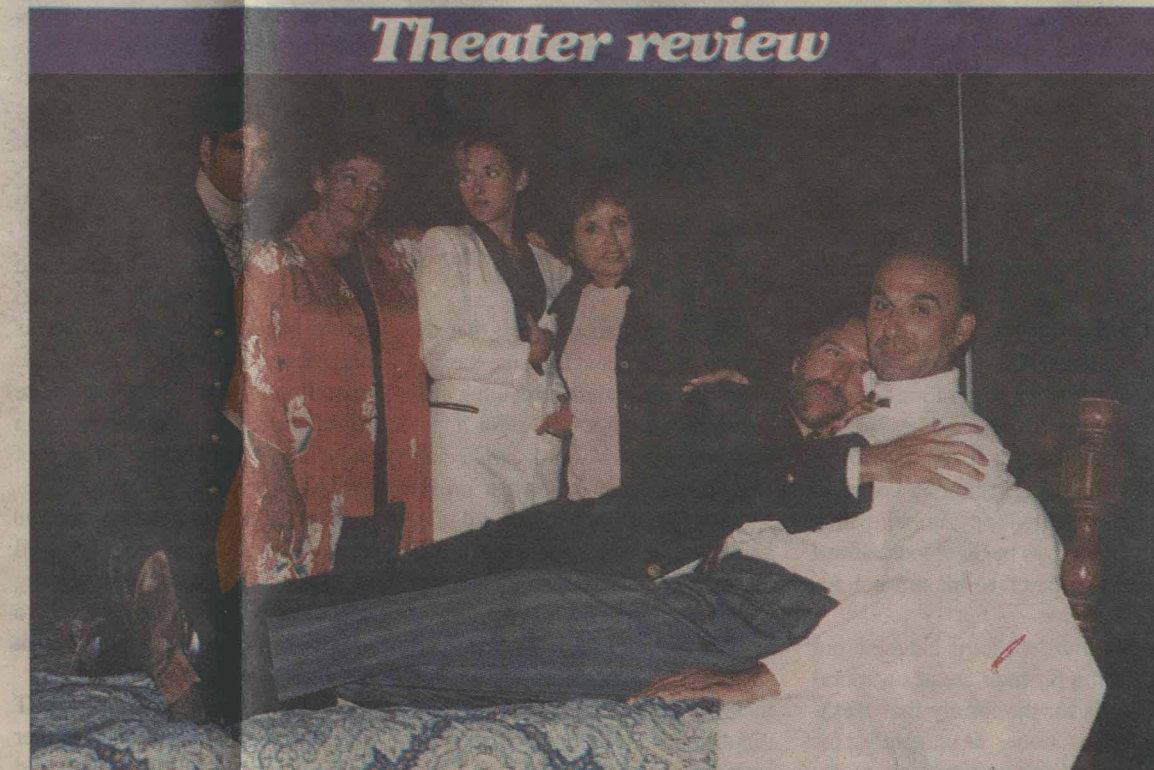
The two-act play is being presented this week at the Provincetown Inn, 1 Commercial St., at 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday.

The ghost, Captain Harcourt, is played by John Lescault, and there's no doubt that, despite his spectral existence, the Captain is by far the

most fully alive character in the play. His life was one of passion and of wonder for all the world had to offer. His death was sudden and violent, and now, 100 years later, it is still cloaked in mystery.

When the play opens, Harcourt is playing Trivial Pursuit with Dwayne (Nick Harris) and Emma (Lynda Sturmer), a middle-aged couple taking a break from their former hectic lives after Dwayne narrowly survives a heart attack. The couple sign on as housesitters and tour guides at the Wellfleet home of long-deceased John Biddle. But what they find instead of peace and quiet is a ghost seeking to right a century-old wrong and an unexpected way to bring vitality back into their own lives.

Emma defers to Dwayne in almost all cases, and Dwayne, who initially appears somewhat flat and bored, soon takes on a tiger-in-the-cage persona as he bristles against



“Melville” cast members, (standing L-R) Keith Amato, Robin Howard, Caitlin Gibbon, Lynda Sturmer; (on the bed L-R) John Lescault, Nick Harris.

the sedentary life he has been thrust into. His love of history and accuracy reveal themselves as his underlying passion.

As the couple settles in and the audience tries to figure out who Harcourt, in his 19th-century garb,

is, two of the play's remaining three characters, Elise Biddle (Caitlin Gibbon) and Mrs. Biddle (Robin Howard) put in their first appearance.

Elise, the daughter, is a corporate, uptight prig who shows few re-

deeming human qualities. Gibbon is icily on track as the one we love to hate, from her ubiquitous briefcase to her nasty development plans. Mrs. Biddle, the mother, is a much more free spirit, with an obvious

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Photos Sue Harrison

Melville continued from page 25 heart to go along with her acerbic comments about life as part of the Biddle family.

Harcourt, who can only be seen by Emma and Dwayne, slowly reveals the horrific secrets of the past and the murder John Biddle is credited with heroically solving in the official history of the house. Like the sea that can be heard but not seen from Biddle House, Harcourt is always a presence. Before all is said and done, everyone has more than a few shocks when Dwayne undertakes to bring the truth out of the shadows.

The final character in the play is

Jack, played by Keith Amato. His scenes as the young seaman who was killed are brief but carry substantial emotional weight.

Lescault plays Harcourt masterfully. He easily takes the audience, as well as Dwayne and Emma, along with him in his reminiscences from the frozen Arctic with its shimmering blue light to the sweet completeness of waking in the arms of one's beloved. He quotes Hawthorne and Melville and drops tantalizing tidbits about who slept with whom in the house's big feather bed.

Led by the irrepressible Lescault, the actors all turn in solid perfor-

mances and demonstrate real chemistry with each other.

Sets, costumes and lighting are simple but more than adequate. Sound effects, beginning with the waves fading in and out and later the addition of haunting *lines* from Jack's flute-playing add to the feeling of straddling two realities.

Director Margaret Van Sant has put together a strong piece of theater, especially when one considers that rehearsals ran only two weeks and that a week before opening the venue changed, requiring the entire play to be re-blocked in a different configuration at the Provincetown Inn.