

Frank Gagliano: A Thornton Wilder for a Skeptical Age

Audrey Ahern

Actress

May 1, 2010

Thornton Wilder is one of the most recognizable names in American theater. The author of *Our Town*, *The Matchmaker*, *The Skin of Our Teeth*, and one-act gems such as *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* and *The Long Christmas Dinner*, Wilder was ahead of his time in his wild experimentalism, employing Brechtian alienation and non-linear storytelling to provide audiences with thought-provoking productions. At the same time, his plays are filled with down-home American wisdom and Christian theology.

Less well known, but no less unique, Frank Gagliano is a playwright who blends cultures, media, and styles to create a visceral, engaging, and often shocking style of theater that is entirely his own. There is a remarkable resemblance to their approach to theater and to the world at large. Both Gagliano and Wilder set their seminal works in idyllic American locales – for Wilder, of course, this is Grover’s Corners; for Gagliano it is Bodoni County. Both play loosely with time, moving from past to present and from one locale to another, and both often

employ narrators outside the main flow of action. Most importantly, both men use theater to call audiences to greater communication with and participation in the people and the world around them. However, while Wilder sees a higher meaning in life, an almost religious transcendence to be reached through the seemingly mundane, Gagliano sees chaos and futility in life and attempts to portray it onstage with humor, irony, and sometimes heartbreak. Thus, Frank Gagliano is a Thornton Wilder for a skeptical age. He is a Thornton Wilder for off-Broadway experimentalism, for a world wracked by nuclear threats and political upheaval, for a world obsessed with technology, for a world lost and confused.

Gagliano's one-act play, *Big Sur*, bears a great deal of resemblance to Wilder's one-act *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden*. Both *Big Sur* and *The Happy Journey* are plays set in a car, chronicling a cross-country road trip. Both have an outside narrator that moves things along and sometimes become characters in the story; Wilder provides the Stage Manager (an early incarnation of *Our Town*'s famous character) and Gagliano creates the Balladeer. Both Ma Kirby in *The Happy Journey* and Jeremy Chester in *Big Sur* cannot refuse to help anyone along the way. In Wilder's play, however, this leads to joy or fulfillment. In *Big Sur*, nearly every passenger Jeremy picks up betrays him, challenging him to remain optimistic in the big world outside Bodoni County. *The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden* ends with Ma singing a hymn and urging her daughter to move on past tragedy through acceptance of God's will. *Big Sur* ends with Jeremy Chester and the Indian driving into Monterey Bay, able to move on to the near-mythical Big Sur only after the garbage boats sail over them and dump their cargo out to sea. In this way, both plays end on a hopeful yet poignant note, but Gagliano seems to be suggesting a kind of futility. As the garbage floats out to sea, meaningless in the wide ocean, so too does Jeremy Chester float out, forgotten and meaningless in the wide ocean of existence, though he is able to find private

fulfillment in his anticipated arrival at Big Sur.

One of the most important themes in *Our Town* is also at work in *Big Sur*. Jeremy Chester's whole motivation for his journey is that he wants "to dialogue" with the people he meets along the way. He wants "to talk to people – not past them – open up to them – have them open up to me" (5). This is highly reminiscent of Emily Webb's cry in the graveyard, "We don't have time to look at one another" (207). Both Gagliano and Wilder are seeking a higher level of communication between human beings. But while Gagliano seems to suggest that human beings will never attain it, Wilder implies that there is a greater communication and transcendence at work, with human beings able "to dialogue" by finding a greater meaning in their relationship to the universe as a whole. Simon Stimson (also a church musician like Jeremy Chester) says, "That's what it was to be alive. To move about in a cloud of ignorance; to go up and down trampling on the feelings of those... of those about you. To spend and waste time as though you had a million years" (207). Mrs. Gibbs, however, rebukes him and tells Emily to look up at the stars. Through the stars they find their own meaning; they are not merely garbage floating out to sea, but tiny parts of a great and beautiful universe.

Gagliano's *The Resurrection of Jackie Cramer* is remarkably similar to *Our Town* especially in the climactic final scene of Wilder's signature work. In both plays, the protagonist returns from the grave to look at their past lives. Both Emily and Jackie are greeted by a group of celestial beings, Emily by the dead of Grover's Corners, Jackie by the heavenly Board of Directors, or B.O.D. for short. Both Emily and Jackie expect to enjoy looking back at their lives. Emily believes she will be able to revisit the joy she experienced; Jackie thinks he will laugh at the futility and inanity of it all. Both characters, however, are surprised. It is painful to look back on a life they can no longer participate in. The B.O.D. says, "What does it feel like looking in, / forever...from outside?" (30) Emily and Jackie also find that they

cannot bear to look back at life because they see all the things they did not see when they were alive. Emily mourns, “It goes so fast. We don’t have time to look at one another... I didn’t realize. So all that was going on and we never noticed” (207). Similarly, Jackie asks, “What’s going on? / Did I cause all this? / Did my never touching them, bring them to this? / Oh God I feel the pain, of knowing that I never was knowing / my family’s pain” (51). When he accepts the sting of lost opportunity, the B.O.D. joyfully welcomes him to Heaven, where, like Emily, he finds his eternal place among the stars; the B.O.D. greet him, “Follow us up to Heaven where you will be made one / with all the star stuff in the universe.” (52)

The Resurrection of Jackie Cramer ends on a much more hopeful note than does *Big Sur*, and its similarity to Wilder’s work is far more apparent. Nevertheless, *Jackie Cramer* of course has its own Gagliano twist. The most glaring difference is that *Jackie Cramer* is a musical, but the more important difference is in the tone. Emily’s return to Grover’s Corners is marked with nostalgia and longing, infused with a sense of beauty in the ordinary. Jackie Cramer’s return on the other hand, is permeated with biting humor and a satiric wit. While Gagliano embraces the ordinary man’s life, he also seems to point out the absurdity of it. After all, Jackie “died on a Monday / by slipping on dog do / and hitting his head on a Volkswagen fender” (1). His death is so ridiculous, it seems almost meaningless, casting doubts on the meaning of his life as a whole. *The Resurrection of Jackie Cramer* suggests that man has greater value than that of garbage floating out to sea and, like *Our Town*, places man among the stars. At the same time, however, it melds Wilder’s philosophical optimism with the modern consciousness and sense of confusion.

In *The Bodoni County Songbook Anthology*, Gagliano is aware of his Wilder-esque qualities; in the blurb at the beginning of the play, he goes so far as to call it “a 21st Century combination of *Our Town*/ *Spoon River*/Jacques Brel on acid.” The similarities between the two

works are quite apparent. Jonathan Overview, from his vantage point on “‘Despair Lookout’ on Limbo Hill,” guides the audience through Bodoni County, just as the Stage Manager guides the audience through Grover’s Corners from his lookout at the cemetery. Jonathan calls himself the P.O.V. – or Point of View. Like the Stage Manager, he is aware of everything going on in the world around him. The Stage Manager, however, sets out to show the audience and “the people a thousand years from now... the way we were: in our growing up and in our marrying and in our living and in our dying” (166). Jonathan Overview, on the other hand, sets out “to chronicle a day in the life of an American County – BODONI COUNTY– whose residents will step forward and sing their angst away” (2). Interestingly in his introductory blurb, Gagliano says directly that most of the residents of Bodoni County want to get out, whereas in *Our Town*, Mr. Webb says, “[O]ur young people here seem to like it well enough. Ninety percent of ‘em graduating from high school settle down right here to live – even when they’ve been away to college” (161). The only person in *Our Town* who is not satisfied with life in Grover’s Corners is Simon Stimson, the alcoholic choir director who commits suicide. Almost no one in Bodoni County is content with life there. For Wilder, Simon Stimson is the exception; for Gagliano, and perhaps for the modern world at large, Simon Stimson is the norm. The people of Grover’s Corners find contentment in the ordinary, whereas the people of Bodoni County share the modern restlessness, an urge to move on but an uncertainty as to the goal of their moving on.

Like Wilder’s Stage Manager, Jonathan finds pain in his role as the omniscient Point of View, but, unlike the Stage Manager, he gives it up his role, feeling that he is not worthy of the pain, that the pain is almost a reward he has not earned. Jonathan seems to suggest that pain is an end in itself, something desirable that must be achieved. It is an interesting twist on the theme in *Our Town*, where pain is an inevitable part of life, but not an end in itself. For Wilder man finds himself when he discovers the pain of lost opportunity, moves beyond it, and places

himself in the eternal; for Gagliano, man finds himself when he discovers pain.

Frank Gagliano's experiments in form and style are as ground-breaking today as Wilder's were in the early 20th century, and his concern with true communication between human beings is a universal concern that is just as relevant now as it was when Wilder tackled it in the 1930's. The difference lies in the conclusions that the two writers draw. Both acknowledge that true, deep communication is rarely, if ever, possible. However, Gagliano replaces Wilder's hope in an eternal transcendence with a more skeptical acceptance of futility. Man is not meaningless in himself, but he finds his meaning when he accepts the chaos, the uncertainty, and his inability to communicate fully. Frank Gagliano is, then, a Thornton Wilder for a skeptical and ironic age.

Works Cited

Gagliano, Frank. *Big Sur*. New York: Dramatists Play Service, 1971.

Gagliano, Frank. *From the Bodoni County Songbook Anthology*.
www.gaglianoriff.com

Gagliano, Frank. *The Resurrection of Jackie Cramer*.
www.gaglianoriff.com

Wilder, Thornton. *Collected Plays and Writings on Theater*. New York: The Library of America, 2007.