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Dead Poets Society

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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New York City stalwart the Classic Stage Company tackles a newer classic this winter, with the staging of playwright Tom Schulman's "**Dead Poet's Society**," a look into the lives of a group of prep school students and the charismatic teacher who wants them to "suck the marrow out of life."

As Mr. Keating, the role made famous by the late Robin Williams, is funnyman Jason Sudeikis, a talented improv actor from "Saturday Night Live" fame, who (full disclosure) happens to live three doors down from me. We have not met.

The bulk of the action is centered in 1950s Vermont at Welton Academy, or as the boys call it, "Hellton," a rigorous all-boys prep school renowned for upholding the four pillars of "tradition, honor, discipline, and excellence." The Ivy League-bound teens lampoon this as "travesty, horror, decadence and excrement," but all are clearly imbued with its pedagogy.

The set is simple but effective. The back wall is a bookcase with a movable chalkboard and a sliding ladder. Hanging library lamps complete the illusion. The six youth leads populate the classroom in traditional school uniforms, moving volumes of books to the stage area throughout the play to create impromptu desks and chairs. In quiet moments, they hum the Wellton Academy song, to a nice effect.

Entering the fracas is Wellton alumnus John Keating, a provocative new hire who opens the boys' minds up to an anti-authoritarian philosophy of life. He has the students read Robert Kerrick's famous lines, "Gather the rosebuds while ye may, Old time is still a-flying/ And this same flower that smiles today, Tomorrow will be dying." And he instructs them to address him in the patois of Walt Whitman as "O Captain, my captain."

Life is short, Keating tells them, and passion rarely comes in those vocations that pay the bills. Carpe diem, says Keating; seize the day! For these teens, who have been drilled to excel in medicine, law, or banking, the exultation of liberal arts is something foreign and exotic.

A little research into Keating's school yearbook reveals his membership in a club known only as the Dead Poets Society. He explains to the boys that the group "was dedicated to sucking the marrow out of life" by reading poetry in a nearby cave, adding, "we did not simply read. We let it drip from our tongues like honey. Women swooned, spirits soared... Gods were created, gentlemen! Not a bad way to spend an evening!"

Soon after, the boys come together to create their own version of the club, and it does change them. Neil Perry (Thomas Mann of "Me and Earl and the Dying Girl" fame) goes against the will of his strict father and finds his passion as Puck in Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream."

Knox Overstreet (William Hochman) musters the courage to declare his love to Chris (Francesca Carpanini), a girl from a nearby high school. And Charlie Dalton (Cody Kostro) rocks the boat when he slips a letter into the school's newspaper, demanding girls be admitted to Welton, attributed to the Dead Poets Society.

This, combined with Keating's constant exercises to get the boys to practice individualism and non-conformity, attract the attention of the Headmaster. When Neil confides in Mr. Keating about disobeying his father's orders to participate in the play, the teacher advises him to talk to his father and "let him see who you are."

But Mr. Perry (Stephen Barker Turner) won't hear a word about his son's love of acting, insisting that the boy will become a doctor. The crowd's standing ovation does not sway him; Mr. Parker promises to send him to a military academy. Neil despairs and commits suicide.

This is the turning point of the production. Neil's roommate, the quiet stutterer Todd Anderson (an excellent Zane Pais), breaks down in tears, saying, "even if Mr. Perry didn't shoot him, he killed him." But the school administrators hang it on Mr. Keating, a convenient scapegoat.

Brownnoser Richard Cameron (Yaron Lotan) is quick to blame it all on their teacher. The other boys are grilled and forced to sign a letter to that effect, the lone objector being Todd. Mr. Keating is subsequently given the boot.

The play ends on a high note, however, when Mr. Keating returns to the classroom to collect his personal items. Starting with Todd, the boys stand on their desks, addressing their beloved teacher as "O Captain, my captain."

Except for his occasional cocksure flippancy, Sudeikis portrayed John Keating in excellent form -- an homage to Robin Williams. And the young actors all comported themselves very well, with Pais and Mann truly excelling in their roles.

After a string of lukewarm productions, Classic Stage Company seems to be back on track to becoming the venerable downtown Broadway playhouse it's renowned to be.

"Dead Poet's Society" runs through December 18 at Classic Stage Company, 136 E. 13th St. in New York City. For information or tickets, call 212-677-4210 or visit <http://www.classicstage.org/tickets/>

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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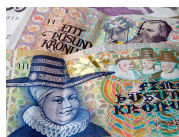
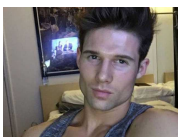


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