

CRIMES OF THE HEARTLESS

by Michael Giltz

Playwright Romulus Linney still vividly remembers his mother talking to him from beyond the grave. “We lived in a little town outside of Nashville,” he recalls. “My father was a doctor and my mother was an amateur actor. She took me to a dress rehearsal of ‘Our Town’ when I was five or six. I took some chocolate cupcakes because I thought I was going to be bored by this play. And I sat there with these cupcakes and there’s my mother up on stage and some guy was her son and I thought, ‘wait a minute, I’m her son.’ Then she’s dead—and you know those last scenes in ‘Our Town’ are about as sentimental as an ice pick—and they’re wandering around, and they don’t know where they’re going.

“And I’d forgotten about the cupcakes,” laughs Linney, now 65, miming the look of a little boy transfixed by what he is watch-

ing, each hand absentmindedly cradling a treat. “And I just started crying, and the cupcakes were crumbling—it was a big mess.”

Naturally, Linney devoted his life to theatre. And whether the result of genetics or infectious enthusiasm, his daughter Laura has done the same. She earned rave for the recent revival of “Holiday” at Circle in the Square, and is currently on-screen in “Primal Fear” opposite Richard Gere.

As for dad, his new play “True Crimes,” (which he also directed) is at Theater for the New City through January 21.

“True Crimes” basic plot comes from Tolstoy’s “The Power of Darkness,” which Linney found to be “horrific and daring and in some ways wonderful” when he read it as a student at Yale. Still, he says, “Tolstoy was misogynistic. And the thing that really ruins

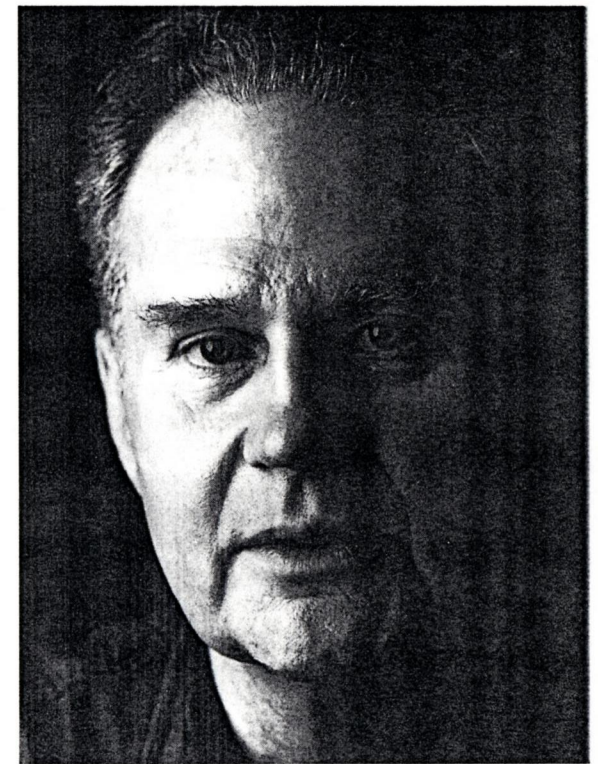
the play is that all the women are terrible, horrible, scheming people, and the men are fine, terrific creatures.”

Nonetheless, Linney kept the tale in the back of his mind, where it remained until he stumbled upon a old chapbook of gruesome crimes. “It detailed all the murder cases of the 19th century, with stark black and white illustrations. And they were marvelous! They’d show a man with his foot on a woman’s face and choking her to death with a rope or chopping her in half or someone else hanging.”

That gave him the starting point to create Logan Lovel, a lazy, good-looking fellow who strikes up an affair with a married woman. Since she’s married to a wealthy, but sick, husband, Logan’s fiercely pragmatic mother and preacher father push him to accept work on the husband’s land, putting Logan in an opportune place for when whatever happens—presumably, death—happens. Unfortunately, what happens is that the husband becomes suspicious, and his young daughter becomes enamored of Logan herself. One fateful decision follows another until Logan and his family find themselves committing the most horrific of murders.

The setting of “True Crimes”—the Appalachian Mountains in 1900—is hardly surprising, since the core of his work has revolved around that culture. “I’ve always been fascinated by everything Appalachian, not the least of it being the violence of the Appalachians,” says Linney, who lives on the Upper West Side and teaches full-time at Columbia University. “They’re very quiet and very taciturn, but when they go, they go, and you don’t want to mess with them.”

That fascination has served him well.



Linney does not want for approbation: He has received fellowships from the Guggenheim and Rockefeller Foundations as well as the National Endowment for the Arts; he’s won an OBIE Award; and he had the Signature Theatre Company devote an entire season to his work. But because his career has been spent Off Broadway and in regional theatres, Linney lacks the name recognition of his contemporaries.

Looking back, Linney rests assured that bigger isn’t always better. “It seems like every time I do a play in a larger theatre, some huge wrong thing would happen, and it would fail,” he says amiably.

“But I know a lot of writers who are very unhappy with themselves. And basically I’m at peace with the things I’ve tried to do. Some of them have been crazy, and I’ve gotten a just comeuppance. But they were all honestly felt.” ★

Photo by Susan Johann



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