

# living wicked

**Raby's version  
of Bradbury  
as a work in progress**

by Allan Sheppard



**Consider this. If life is a work-in-progress, which is the tragedy: that it should end before it is finished, or that it be finished before it ends?**

In an era which sanctifies instant gratification, bottom-line ethics, and absolutist politics and theology (some of which may seem to be mutually exclusive, though they are not) it is generally the former which is seen as the greater loss, for the individual and to society; but is it necessarily so? What could be less satisfying than a life which is complete at, say 21, or 35, or 50, and simply played out for another 50, 40, or 20 years?

When that great philosopher (and better-than-average baseball player) Yogi Berra, told us that "It isn't over till it's over," he asserted both his right and his duty never to deny the prospect of redemption either for himself or his opponent; and as it is in baseball, so should it be in life (a game which is also played without a time limit).

Gyllian Raby's adaptation for the stage of Ray Bradbury's novel, *Something Wicked This Way Comes*, is nothing if not a work-in-progress, which is to say, in this context, that it is a kind of living thing. I saw the first version in the spring of 1989 and, having seen the current version (January 22, John L. Haar Theatre, for Northern Light Theatre), I look forward to the next staging, whenever and wherever that may be, as I am sure it will and must be. In the best of all possible worlds, Ms. Raby might stage versions every five years or so in the manner of the British filmmaker who interviews the same group of people every five years to produce an evolving documentary of their lives and times — and I, of course, would have the good fortune to see another ten of them, or so.

What Raby has done with this work is fix on a metaphor for the stage which is able to stimulate and reflect her development as a person and as an artist. In this respect, she follows the example of Robert Lepage in works such as his *Polygraph*, which Raby both translated into English and presented in Edmonton as part of her 1990/91 Northern Light season. In so doing, she attempts more and achieves less than her colleague. But where Lepage is close to having explored the range and depth of his metaphor in *Polygraph* fully, Raby has merely opened up some tantaliz-

ing prospects for further exploration and development.

The play, like the novel, tells the story of Charles Holloway, a bookish man who, having risen no higher than a dead-end job as janitor at the library in a small town in the American Midwest, senses his mortality (it is his 54th birthday, and he has a weak heart) and wonders whether he has failed himself, his wife and, especially, his two sons (one natural, one adopted, both 18).

The doubts and fears, the temptations and regrets, which flow with increasing urgency from his self-awareness, are played out in a Faustian fantasy in which an ominous Mr. Dark brings his Pandemonium Circus to town and tries to destroy Holloway's faith in his own goodness and the essential goodness of life by playing on his fears and self-doubt. Holloway takes comfort and guidance from books (demonstrating, perhaps, that a canon is a powerful weapon) and, in the end, emerges triumphant in the knowledge that there is nothing in death so evil as a life not lived; guilty of that sin as Holloway may have been, he is redeemed by his acknowledgement and acceptance of it.

Such tales of affirmation are uncommon in these cynical times. Raby's challenge in presenting it was to keep it from drifting into mawkishness. Her solution was to stage the story as a hybrid opera/ballet/circus/revival meeting in which much of the essence is presented in actions and symbols rather than words, which too easily ring false in our ears, having been used too often (and in vain) in countless movies-of-the-week, soap operas, and motivational seminars. Raby also squeezed every ounce of theatricality and stage wizardry out of a budget that would not buy Phantom of the Opera a week's supply of fog juice, but which she used to capture, nevertheless, some of the it-can-only-happen-in-theatre magic that is so critical a part of the attraction of Andrew Lloyd Webber's best work. It doesn't always work for Raby, but when it does, it dazzles.

Where the show is weakest is, perhaps ironically, where its hero is weakest: in the heart. It's full of guts and muscle, balls and brains, but it's short on heart. Too often there isn't room or time or energy enough to care about what happens to Holloway in proportion to the commotion generated by his dilemma. In part, that's due to the inherent problem of presenting a passive character forcefully on stage, but it is also due to a lack of focus reflecting too much concern with the technology relative to the psychology. However, that's fixable. Having solved many of the technical problems revealed by the first production, Raby is now free to work on the character of her hero for the next one (which I hope there will be).

Theatre in this century has been, too often and too much, a matter of text and, by inevitable extension, analysis. That's not a bad thing — we can learn much about generality from particulars — but it embraces a narrow view of what theatre is and can be. Synthesis is also a valid creative force and a source of powerful insights. How else do we account, without condescension, for the Andrew Lloyd Webber phenomenon, except to acknowledge that the whole can transcend its parts, even when those parts are close to banality? Which is not to say that Raby's material in *Something Wicked* is banal, only that she transcends it more often than not, and often enough to make it worth seeing, and preserving.

As the saying goes: You can't do that on television. Nor would you want to. And that is a Good Thing.