

Stage: 'Narrow Road to Deep North'

Bond's Play Examines Man's Responsibility

NARROW ROAD TO THE DEEP NORTH, a play by Edward Bond. Directed by Dan Sullivan; settings by Douglas W. Schmidt; lighting by John Gleason; costumes by Carrie Fishbein Robbins; music composed by Stanley Silverman; production stage manager, Patrick Horrigan. Presented by the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center, under the direction of Jules Irving. At the Vivian Beaumont Theater, Lincoln Center.

Basho.....Robert Symonds
Kiro.....Andy Robinson
Argl.....James Cahill
Tola.....James Toikan
Helgoo.....Robert Christlan
Breebree.....Lawrence Wolf
Shogo.....Cleavon Little
Prime Minister.....Philip Bosco
Commodore.....Sydney Walker
Georgina.....Martha Henry
First peasant.....Harold Miller
Peasant woman.....Marilyn Meyers
Old prisoner.....Ray Fry
Nun.....Susan Sharkey
Gunner Tar.....Richard Greene
Gunner Tar's mate.....Robert Phalen
Second peasant.....Stuart Pankin
Peasant wife.....Susan Sharkey
A man from the river.....Richard Kilne
Peasants, soldiers, tribesmen, etc.
Richard Greene, Richard Kilne, Marilyn Meyers, Harold Miller, Stuart Pankin, Ronald Roston, Susan Sharkey, Ray Stewart, Peter Well, Mark Woods
Stage managers.....Louis Avalos, Crickett Coan, James Cook
Musicians.....Thomas Kaye, flute; Richard Flitz, percussion; Roy Pennington, percussion



Robert Symonds, left, and Andy Robinson

Martha Swope

By CLIVE BARNES

Perhaps I was wrong about Edward Bond's "Narrow Road to the Deep North," for we all make mistakes. The play made its New York debut at the Vivian Beaumont Theater last night and I found it distressingly tedious. This is fair enough opinion — even the paying audience appeared to be faintly soporific — but it hardly coincides with my previously expressed views on the play. Was I wrong in the first place, or is merely the Lincoln Center Repertory Company wrong in the second? Let us discuss this.

Mr. Bond is one of the best known of the younger generation of British playwrights. The only play of his previously seen professionally in New York was "Saved," which was given by the Chelsea Theater in Brooklyn. Later La Mama offered an experimental showing of his "Early Morning." The present play, "Narrow Road," has been given twice previously in America, in Los Angeles and in Boston, and I saw and admired both productions. I do not at all admire this New York version at Lincoln Center, but possibly the fault is mine.

Mr. Bond is a moralist playwright obsessed at a deep level with the question of responsibility, and in a far more superficial way with those trappings of the former British Empire—flag, brotherhood, drums, hymns and class—that made living under it insupportable for any but its handful of white Patricians. He is anti-Establishment, and one of his dangers may be that he is writing about an Establishment that has already departed.

"Narrow Road" is about a haiku poet, Matsuo Basho, who observes, with poetic objectivity, the rise and fall of a dictator, Shogo. Opposed to him is the Commodore—full-fledged and pompous symbol of British imperialism—and his Bible-thumping sister, Georgian, who believes that a little Christianity can subjugate the natives even better than a lot of bullets. Basho opens the play by leaving an abandoned body—a glittering-eyed baby—by a river shore. This is the in-

fant destined to grow up as Shogo—tyrant, hero, man of action. Perhaps he should have killed it then—but he proceeded northward on his lean, cold journey to enlightenment. Where then was his responsibility?

The story is told in an Oriental fashion with a kind of Brechtian simplicity. The writing has a fake Oriental archness to it—a solemnity, at times a pomposity. Yet the ideas are fresh. Even this conflict between a Gilbert and Sullivan extravaganza world where Britannia rules the vibes and the cool samurai deliberation of Japanese court drama has the stuff of theater about it. And the moral problems raised and the historic references satirically alluded to makes this a potentially rich play.

At least it seemed that way in the past. Here it seemed a disaster, a pretentious essay in modish playwriting. Yet the play really is more than this. What went wrong? Obviously the staging by Dan Sullivan for a start. This, for one thing, failed to distinguish sufficiently between the elements of home and colonial, between haiku poets and classic gunboats. This is meant to be a terrible comedy in a suburb of hell, and it needs a wit to its staging. The actors should be told to think more of Oscar Wilde than of Bertold Brecht. (In British comedy, actors should always be told to think of Oscar Wilde, at least this will keep them cheerful).

Also some of the acting, indeed most of the acting, was so misjudged that you felt inclined to appeal against it. In the key role of Basho, Robert Symonds, unctuous-voiced and cringing like a yellowing leaf, was most memorably bad. He was miscast but went to his purgatory without even the protest of acting. Sydney Walker as the Commodore—on whom the sun should never set—wore his gilded uniform as if it were hired and shouted comic heroics with serious diffidence. Even Philip Bosco seemed obsequiously invisible as a spare Prime Minister, and most of the rest of the cast proved enthusiastic but otherwise unnoticeable.

Cleavon Little's Shogo, calm, reserved and arrogant, did make something of the dictator, and I very much liked Andy Robinson's spirituality as the pure and innocent priest, Kiro. But the best performance came from Martha Henry as the tambourine thumping, salvationist-colonialist Georgina; full of empty sexual unfulfillment and diverted energy, her whole character sublimated into a caricature.

This staging does the play a disservice. How much of a disservice I am honestly not completely certain. "Narrow Road to the Deep North" is a far better play than it would appear to be from its Lincoln Center production. But on just how much better I will for the moment hold my peace.