The Canterville Ghost

Wilde's finest poetry is in his prose, and his finest prose is in his children's stories. Most are dark. Sacrifice and heartbreak are the themes. Frank homage is paid to Hans Christian Andersen, whose little match girl and little mermaid repeat their roles in Wilde's *The Happy Prince* and *The Fisherman and His Soul*.

The Canterville Ghost looks at the sunnier side. Virginia's sacrifice, and the ghost's heartbreak, reach the endings we hoped. All of Wilde's ideas but one are inspired. He was never in better form. Not many writers could have sent up the stolid Otises or the indignant Sir Simon so richly while leaving us in on their side throughout.

While my *Usher House* turns Poe upside down, the libretto for *The Canterville Ghost* follows Wilde's short story pretty closely. His one misjudgment was Sir Simon's murder of his wife, three centuries before, and his breezy justification of it to Virginia. That might have fit in many of Wilde's works. Here it grates against the wholesome and family-friendly theme. The libretto, like the 1944 movie with Charles Laughton, changes this detail. The bloodstain is also relocated from the floor to the armor, so that the audience can see it. Also Canterville and Cheshire are given more continuous roles, Washington Otis is left out, and Mrs. Umney is seen but not heard. These changes reflect no critique of Wilde. Stage and page have different needs.

The fidelity of the libretto to the original, these aside, led to twenty scenes averaging three minutes. These quick changes call for high-tech staging, with a minimum of bulk to haul on and off. A two-level set to distinguish bedrooms from the dining room and library should be considered, but not necessarily preferred. Any such structure would have to be able to retract quickly and silently for the outdoor scenes.

When *Usher House* and *Canterville* are staged as a double bill, or even separately, it is probably more effective to show the ancestors in the first, and most or all clambake guests in the second, as projections. This is all the more advantageous in that the ancestors must dance and the guests play sports. The time is past when actual performers, however adept, are likely to work better at this. The staff in *Canterville* should be real actors, even so, as we want no suggestion that they are supernatural. They can double as family members in Scene 1, with a quick change to get them to the start of Scene 2.

With all respect to the principles of dramaturgy, we writers and composers lean to the view that a word or chord can be worth a thousand pictures. The wisest masters of stagecraft, from Aeschylus to Wagner, knew never to show what is deepest. Some things must be seen on the inside. The flight of angels taking Hamlet to his rest must be understated by Horatio, and left alone by the director. If a single thing moves on stage except Isolde's mouth while she is describing Tristan's resurrection in the *Liebestod*, she and Wagner are denied the chance to prove they can make us see it better without that help. So it is with the murdered Tsarevitch in *Boris*, or Banquo in the banquet scene in *Macbeth*. If the director puts them there, the singer and composer and librettist are preempted from doing so.

Cases in point would be Wilde's ancient almond, or what Virginia sees on her journey. The almond would make a wonderful logo to project on the front scrim as withered while the audience files in, and as blooming while they file out. But any attempt to show it during the action misses a fine opportunity not to. Leaving it to our imagination becomes more powerful in that those on stage see and describe it several times. The director who keeps it just out of our own view proves that she trusts her living and dead colleagues, respects the audience, and will not give in.

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