THE LAUREATE: A Performing Artist’s Response

By Jay Ansill

[*Jay Ansill is a composer and musician who has written for and performed in many theatrical productions and released several solo albums, including* A Lost World*, an adaptation of poems by Robert Graves. He is also an accomplished practitioner of Origami and has written two books on the subject. He corresponded with Laura (Riding) Jackson during the last seven years of her life.*]

Having spent so much time working on plays, I’m sensitive to the need to communicate a lot of information in a limited amount of time. (It’s one of my biggest frustrations with theater.) Often this happens in the form of using stock characters rather than complex ones that don’t fit into a simple category, so you have these stereotypical tropes -- the wise old man, the deranged Vietnam vet, the sassy 10-year-old girl, the evil genius, etc. You basically already know them from the minute they arrive, so the play or movie can focus on the action rather than using up valuable time trying to make us understand the complications of complicated personalities.

I’m also sensitive to the necessity of having to discard details for the sake of narrative simplicity or time or even budget. (Hiring four children and whatever else that would require --tutors, caregivers, etc. -- would have cost a lot more than one and since there was only one child that was required by the story being told, I can see why Nunez decided to just give Robert and Nancy one child.) So, as much as my hackles were raised at every factual falsehood, I also let most of them go because, while these things are important to people like us, in the world of the movie, those details weren’t all that important. (Although he could have easily inserted a line such as “Catherine, go tell your sister and brothers that dinner is ready”, which would have taken only a second or two, told the audience there were three other children without having to hire three more actors and would avoid erasing real people from real history.)

One of my frustrations with Woody Allen’s movies in the later phase was that they would be an exploration of a premise: What if a character became invisible? What if someone travelled back in time to their favorite period in history? What if this guy fell in love with that guy’s wife while the wife fell in love with this guy’s grown son? Etc., etc. The problem is that these people are all falling in love but there is nothing about them that would lead you to believe that a person would actually fall in love with them. Allen didn’t bother to give any of them personalities or anything. They are like game pieces being moved around a board. There’s no emotional connection with anyone and no stakes.

That was my problem with the way Laura was portrayed in *The Laureate*. We are told that she’s a brilliant writer, so brilliant that both Robert and Nancy want her to come and work with them, but we don’t see the slightest evidence of that. We are told that Robert is devoted to her to the point that he calls her “holy,” but we are given nothing that makes us understand it or feel it. There are no intense conversations about ideas. There’s no moment where we see Robert as being overcome with how amazing this woman’s mind is. There is no sense of mystery about her or any real wit or charisma.

Another thing that bugged me was that (just thinking in dramatic terms here, not about the truth of the situation, which was never going to be a huge priority in a film like this) there are lots of examples of people disparaging Laura’s work. For example, the idea of *The Close Chaplet* being published as a bargaining chip, the scene of Eliot and others making fun of her at a party -- there are lots of allusions to the idea that Laura was not a particularly good writer. So doesn’t that give the impression that Robert and Nancy have crappy taste? I mean, aren’t we supposed to think Robert is great? Isn’t that what the idea of the movie is supposed to be? So if he’s so easily fooled by a mediocre writer who has no particular depth or wit (beside a willingness to tease a guy and get messy while painting a room) just for sex, doesn’t that make him kind of…a pathetic loser? I mean, even Phibbs was smart enough to see through her, and he never did anything that would be considered important enough to be the central character in a movie.

Couldn’t there have been two seconds of Laura being brilliant? Or being acknowledged as brilliant? Or maybe a few seconds of her actually working? Or saying “Sorry, but I can’t have sex with everyone tonight because I’m working on something and I really want to stay focused on that.” It would have made Robert’s devotion to her as something other than a sex object more plausible and sympathetic. Without it the whole story comes down to a sexually unhappy married couple that was duped into having sex with a sexually manipulative slut whose voracious sexual appetite extended beyond the couple to another guy.

And not only was it unclear what anybody saw in Laura beside being a sexual libertine, but it’s unclear what Laura saw in them. Why would someone with Laura’s sense of fun and adventure give up her life in New York and move in with a brooding, shellshocked poet with writer’s block. At least Nunez gave him a bit of history that allows you to feel sorry for him. But nothing makes you like him or identify with him. And my understanding is that Robert could be a lot of fun to be around. And Nancy (who I found to be the only character I was at all interested in), was portrayed as not much more than a long-suffering, humorless unsatisfying wife.

And Phibbs. He was presented as one of these stock characters, the bohemian vagabond. But it didn’t fit with any of the other characters that they would have anything to do with him. He didn’t seem particularly talented or charming or at all like he would be at a party with publishers and literary luminaries. Perhaps you could accuse Laura of hitching her wagon to Robert because he was already somewhat well-known and perhaps could bring her into the literary scene with the Big Boys, but what did Phibbs have to offer her? An intellectual sparring partner? A passionate lover? I didn’t get much of that from him.

Going in, I was prepared to be outraged by another portrayal of Laura as an emotionally unstable megalomaniac who manipulated the people around her into believing that she was allowed to control everyone’s thoughts and actions, but my reaction was actually that the whole thing was kind of … nothing. Really, the whole film was a big nothing. And it was typified by that final stupid line: “But at what cost?” One would expect us to survey the devastation wrought by that whole episode, but instead we are left with Nancy who has moved on to another, seemingly happier, relationship, Robert, who is about to write one of the great documents of the Great War (and soon will write at least one classic work), and Laura, who is recovering (despite the lack of bandages!), and in decent enough spirits.

Just like everything else in the movie, that last line doesn’t deliver on what it implies. Also…the hair! Jesus! They all looked ridiculous!