

“The Belle of Amherst” (Triple Shadow)

Posted by Gail M. Burns - August 2011



Mari Andrejco as Emily Dickinson in the Triple Shadow production of "The Belle of Amherst." Photo provided.

“The soul should always stand ajar, ready to welcome the ecstatic experience.”
– Emily Dickinson

I few months ago I took down my collection of Emily Dickinson’s poetry – a brick-like tome that boasts it is “the only one-volume edition containing all 1,775” poems – and was saddened to discover that her words didn’t speak to me at all. I am poetry-phobic as a rule, and counted Dickinson and A.A. Milne as the only two poets I whose work I understood. I re-shelved the book with a sigh and decided that I must now be too old to enjoy her.

So imagine my delight when actress Mari Andrejco ushered me and the rest of the audience in to the Performance Barn at Triple Shadow and reintroduced me to my old friend, Emily Dickinson. I was so glad to meet her again! She hadn’t abandoned me after all, and, if I could, I would have run to embrace her. After listening to just the first few lines of *The Belle of Amherst* tears were running down my cheeks as I remembered how much Dickinson’s writing had influenced me as a young woman. It was a very happy homecoming.

I do not know how it is possible, with all the theatre that I see, that I hadn’t seen *The Belle of Amherst* since I saw Julie Harris in the original Broadway production in 1976. This summer, as fate will have it, I will see and review it twice, the second time on August 27 at [The Church of St. John in the Wilderness](#) in Copake Falls, NY, in a [Taconic Stage Company](#) production.

“The Mind is so near itself – it cannot see, distinctly – and I have none to ask”
– Emily Dickinson

[Emily Elizabeth Dickinson](#) (December 10, 1830 – May 15, 1886) was born, lived and died in Amherst, Massachusetts. Today her home, The Homestead, and The Evergreens, her brother’s adjacent property, are The Emily Dickinson Museum and I am deeply embarrassed to say that I have never visited. No wonder Emily gave up on me!

Dickinson is now famous as a poet and an eccentric spinster and recluse, but only about a dozen of her poems were published during her lifetime, and it was only during her later years that she took to hiding in her house and wearing white. The older and more reclusive she became, the less poetry she wrote. So in truth Emily Dickinson the poet was a vivacious young woman, while Emily Dickinson the recluse was not a poet.

“I felt it shelter to speak to you.”

– Emily Dickinson

William Luce is credited as the author of *The Belle of Amherst* but he really just took Dickinson’s words, from her poems, letters, and other writings, and rearranged them into a 90-minute biographical narrative. It is Dickinson’s voice we hear, and the lone actress in the piece portrays Emily Dickinson, welcoming the audience as special guests in her home at a time when the real Emily was lowering treats for local children out her bedroom window in a basket so they would not see her face.



The only authenticated image of Emily Dickinson - a daguerreotype taken at Mount Holyoke, December 1846 or early 1847.

This fantasy Emily, as charmingly played by Andrejco, is a woman I would like to have tea with every day. She is funny and gentle and wise, and she quotes a lot of Emily Dickinson’s poetry. We have only one authenticated image of Dickinson, although she described herself as “... small, like the wren, and my hair is bold, like the chestnut bur, and my eyes like the sherry in the glass that the guest leaves.” That she was probably nothing like Luce’s charming hostess is born out by her mentor [Thomas Wentworth Higginson](#) (1823-1911), who wrote, after finally meeting this “little plain woman with two smooth bands of reddish hair” in 1870: “[I never was] with any one who drained my nerve power so much. Without touching her, she drew from me. I am glad not to live near her.”

But this was not just a chance to revisit a beloved piece of theatre and reintegrate Dickinson’s words into my

life, it was a second chance to visit Triple Shadow down in East Otis, a theatre company who, to my knowledge, has not presented any work locally since I saw their double bill of [Sea Change and Arctic Circle](#) exactly a decade ago, when they were working under the name Thunder Bay Ensemble. I had very happy memories of that unique experience, especially of the way the company encourages audience members to interact with each other.

“How strange that nature does not knock, and yet does not intrude!”

– Emily Dickinson

Triple Shadow creates visual theatre which strives to reveal the interconnectedness between human cultures and nature, and here director Beth Skinner has succeeded admirably by setting the play in Dickinson’s beloved garden. During her lifetime Dickinson was probably best known as a gardener. She studied botany from the age of nine and assembled a sixty-six page herbarium containing hundreds of pressed plant specimens that she neatly collected and classified. Her poems are filled with botanical references, and there are some scholars who claim that, by “translating” her language of flowers a very different woman emerges from the works.



Mari Andrejco as Emily Dickinson reads outside of the Performance Barn at Triple Shadow, before welcoming her audience and ushering them in. Photo provided.

Skinner has Andrejco begin the play out of doors, on the lawn between the farmhouse and Performance Barn on the Triple Shadow property which was, within living memory, an egg farm (What is it about Otis and eggs??) Soon she moves inside and where the windows to the barn are uncovered allowing the late evening light to stream in. The curtain time is 7 pm, and during the weeks of this production’s run sunset in East Otis will slip from 7:58 p.m. – 7:33 p.m., so the night falls and the fading light is augmented by some electric lamps as wells as candles and lanterns indoors and out.

Although Skinner and her partner, musician Edward Herbst, usually incorporate live and recorded music into their productions there is none here, nor is there any change in the lighting other than the natural one. August is a month of luxuriant growth and ripeness out of doors, and inside the barn there are many potted flowers and plants Andrejo raised herself. When she looks out the windows of the barn and speaks lines about an orchard, there is an orchard there. When she talks about birdsong that is audible, or at least easily imaginable, too.

When I first saw this show in 1976, I was a 19-year-old city girl and I did not understand the play on words Luce makes between the Belle of Amherst, which Dickinson certainly showed every promise of being when she was 19, and the bells of Amherst, which are referred to frequently in the script. Now that I have been a resident of Williamstown, Massachusetts for 31 years, I understand what it is to live in a town full of bells,

and I can only assume that Amherst – that Williamstown wanna-be – has a similar cacophony of church and college bells that ring everything from the quarter hours to the Flintstones’ theme song when wily students start practicing the carillon on cold winter afternoons.

“*We meet no Stranger, but Ourselves*”

– Emily Dickinson

When you go to Triple Shadow you become part of a small group witnessing an intimate experience and conversation before, at intermission, and afterward is not just encouraged, it is expected. This is antithetical to most modern theatre experience which is both peculiar and sad when I stop to think about it. There are professional reasons why I don’t interact with other audience members as a general rule, but every audience is “a small group witnessing an intimate experience” and why we are not encouraged to feel and act that way is a question worth asking, particularly in these tough economic times when arts organizations are struggling to add value to visitors’ experience without incurring additional costs. Triple Shadow merely facilitated our interaction – and sold us some yummy organic, homemade refreshments to lubricate the process. It was the informality, rather than anything formally organized by the company, that created this wonderful opportunity for audience members to mingle.

If I were you, I would call NOW for tickets. You might consider combining your attendance at a performance with a visit to the [Emily Dickinson Museum](#) – East Otis is about halfway between the heart of the Berkshires and the Pioneer Valley. I am not sure if the Performance Barn at Triple Shadow is wheelchair accessible, but for those able to walk, just not very far, rest assured that there is nearby parking, plenty of chairs, and no long hikes involved.

[Triple Shadow](#) presents its site-specific indoor/outdoor adaptation of *The Belle of Amherst* August 12-September 4 at their Performance Barn at 621 Algeria Road, East Otis, MA 01029. The show runs two hours with one intermission and is suitable for everyone old enough to understand and enjoy Dickinson’s poetry. Performances are Fridays and Saturdays at 7:00 p.m. and Sundays at 5:00 p.m., presented Desserts and beverages will be offered for sale and the audience is encouraged to bring their own pre-performance picnics. Admission is by suggested donation of \$20. Tickets can be reserved by calling 413-269-4201.

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