

2020

Review: The Haunted Life

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Recommended Citation

Greenham, David (2020) "Review: The Haunted Life," *Résonance*: Vol. 2 , Article 18.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/resonance/vol2/iss1/18>

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REVIEW: *The Haunted Life*. By Sean Daniels, based on the book by Jack Kerouac, directed by Sean Daniels and christopher oscar peña, Merrimack Repertory Theater, April 2019, Lowell, Massachusetts.

“Peter Martin, is an average American youth in an average and beautiful American town” are the first words spoken by the leading character in Sean Daniels’ adaptation of Jack Kerouac’s *The Haunted Life*, which had its world premiere at Merrimack Repertory Theater in March 2019. Peter Martin (played wonderfully by Raviv Ullman) is talking about the fictional community of Galloway, Massachusetts. But if you know the recently rediscovered short novel, Peter Martin is really Jack Kerouac, and the average and beautiful town is his beloved Lowell, Massachusetts.

Merrimack Repertory Theater in Lowell is one of the few regional theater companies where the season schedule regularly includes plays that honor and celebrate the local community. Kerouac, as you may know, is a native son. Each fall the city celebrates the great Franco Beat poet who changed the landscape of American literature. His most famous works, *The Dharma Bums* and *On The Road*, continue to represent the longing of being young in America.

Lesser known is this early work – his second, *The Haunted Life*, which, although unfinished, was written in 1944. It was rediscovered in 2014, and former MRT artistic director Sean Daniels persuaded the Kerouac estate to allow him to create a script based on the novel.

Lowell’s Franco history began in the early and mid-1840s with the arrival of a blacksmith, several carpenters, and Catholic clergy (Le Comité franco-américain de Lowell). Some came from Québec while others passed through some of the small communities that dotted the Adirondack Region of New York. Their journey was just the beginning of the same kind of post-Civil War migration that later occurred in states like Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, and Rhode Island. Lowell became one of the centers of the Industrial Revolution, and textile mills, carpet factories, and machine shops desperately sought workers. Their agents traveled throughout Québec in search of workers, and many families sent their teen-age children south.

Kerouac’s parents Léo-Alcide Kéroack and Gabrielle-Ange Lévesque were both born in Québec, and met and married in Nashua, New Hampshire prior to moving to Lowell.

The influence of his parents is evident in the story of the fictional Jack, Peter Martin. His father Joe (gruffly played by Joel Colodner), the working owner of a local printing press, embodied the spirit of the father who’d worked since he was a boy to build a life in a new country. His mother, Vivienne Martin (a gentle Tina Fabrique), was loving and caring. Peter

wants to be a writer. But in 1941, just as the effects of the Great Depression are giving way to industry and prosperity, the demographics are changing.

“America isn’t the same country anymore; it isn’t even America. It’s become a goddamn pest hole for every crummy race from the other side,” Joe Martin complains. “Every scummy race in the world, Jews, Greeks, Armenians, Syrians, they’ve all come here, and they’re still coming, and they’ll keep on coming by the boatload. Mark my word, you’ll see the day when a real American won’t have a chance to work and live decently in his own country, a day when ruin and bankruptcy will fall on this nation because all these damned foreigners will have taken everything over and made a holy mess of it.”

The script perfectly sets a tone that reflects the period, while at the same time allowing us room to examine our own attitudes.

Peter speaks, hopefully, for us: “Come on Pop, they’re not just ‘those foreigners’ they’re my friends. I know those people.” In fact, Peter’s best friend is one of those foreigners, an Armenian refugee named Garabed (earnestly played by Vichet Chum). Garabed is the perfect foil to Joe’s rants. He’s thoughtful, unassuming, and looking to find his place in the new world.

If Peter’s parents and best friend represent both sides of his present, Peter’s future rests in the unabashed wisdom of his classmate, neighbor, and love interest, Eleanor (embodied with great energy by Caroline Neff). An early morning encounter after Peter’s been out drinking all night is indicative of Caroline’s tough love: “You want to be a poet? Write poetry, don’t stumble about on a morning drunk talking about poetry. That’s not being a writer, that’s being a drunken talker, and a morning drunk at that. You give me the shivers. You’re better than that.”

But as we know, World War Two intruded and eventually affected nearly everyone in nearly every country. Peter and his friends were not left unscathed. Peter joins the Merchant Marines (as Kerouac did) and loses friends and family.

The Haunted Life beautifully captures that moment where life goes from a wild and somewhat carefree adventure to a journey filled with as many challenges as joys; it’s a story that follows fictional Peter Martin as he slowly becomes the equal to *On The Road*’s fictional Sal Paradise or *Dharma Bums*’ fictional Raymond Smith. As *The Haunted Life*’s Peter Martin concludes: “Perhaps I cannot conquer the world, but I can record the stories of those who have made me who I am. Simple stories. Small stories. True stories. The people I love, and even when I didn’t love them, loved me. I will make sure they are remembered.”

The stories of the immigrant mill workers and laborers like those from Kerouac’s native Lowell are not often heard. They worked too hard to write, and yet, they are the ones who made our communities. Their stories need to continue to be discovered and shared.

While in America we squander our time with arguments and finger pointing, it's important to remember that we are a nation of immigrants. Our best understanding of our country, of Maine as it enters its bicentennial year, and of what makes these places great, holds together the sacrifices of the native peoples who cherished and nourished the land along with the industry of immigrants who later arrived with their own aspirations. To forget that is to ignore the real history of gifted writers like Kerouac, and to stifle generations of new writers who have yet to put a single word on the page.

-David Greenham

Work Cited

Le Comité franco-américain de Lowell. *History of Franco Americans in Lowell, Massachusetts*, December 2019, <http://francolowellma.com/> .