

Crazy for footlights

Actors, from Brian Dennehy to Hyde Park children, live in a different world

A life in the theater is a life of mystery to those of us not in the theater.

And so I was stunned a couple of weeks ago when legendary 86-year-old actor Mike Nussbaum, on his one night off from his role in Northlight Theatre's production of Clifford's Odets' "Awake and Sing," showed up to perform as part of a benefit for Strawdog Theatre.

Seeing him, I was reminded of something that the great actress Amy Morton, also the director of "Awake and Sing," once told me: "Only crazy people want to be actors."

Brian Dennehy is not of the Chicago theater but he has, over nearly a quarter century, put his mark firmly on the local landscape. It began with "Rat in the Skull" at the bygone Wisdom Bridge Theatre and has continued through many plays, most directed by the Goodman Theatre's Robert Falls.

He is at it again on the Goodman stage — for one more week, ticket seekers — playing the title characters in two demanding one-act plays, Eugene

O'Neill's "Hughie" and Samuel Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape." He has received just praise. My colleague, theater critic Chris Jones, called his work "a bravura piece of contrasting acting — each half deepening the impact of the other."

Last Friday night he looked tired as he took a bow to thunderous applause. Just as the Beckett play plunges its character into the past, so was I thrown back to a pleasant sunny day in 1996 when Dennehy and I were walking through the Lincoln Park Zoo.

We were in the company of his wife, Jennifer, and their then little kids, 3-year-old Cormack and his 8-month-old sister, Sara, both adopted from Ireland. (He has three children from a previous marriage). He was days from opening in O'Neill's "A Touch of the Poet" and we talked about acting and this is what he said: "When you come into the theater, you have to be willing to say, 'We're all here to undergo a communion, to find out what the hell is going on in this world.'"

Saturday on Navy Pier, in the company of a little

girl 24 hours away from making her theatrical debut, I watched two actors do their thing. One played a pirate, the other a dog.

"There is a man inside that dog costume," said the little girl. "Or maybe it could be a woman."

The next afternoon, in the auditorium of a Hyde Park grammar school, I watched dozens of boys and girls perform in an abbreviated version of "Fiddler on the Roof." The singing was good. Parents were delighted. Some kids appeared more engaged than others and I began to wonder if any might one day be afflicted by the same madness that drives Nussbaum and Morton and Dennehy and all the others who have and continue to devote themselves to the theater: When the play was over one little girl beamed. I don't think she had discovered "what the hell is going on in this world," but she had discovered theater and seemed wildly happy about that.

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