

September 15, 2011

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Theater: ERS Tackles Hemingway; Nelson Tackles 9-11

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I saw two shows this weekend, neither one quite successful but both showing admirable ambition. One is *The Select* (*The Sun Also Rises*), the latest adaptation of a classic novel by the acclaimed Elevator Repair Service company (the people behind the wildly successful *Gatz*). The other is *Sweet and Sad*, playwright Richard Nelson's second work in a series about the Apple family and their grapplings with politics, family and the aftermath of 9-11. Both are made with intelligence and care, the sort of show you're glad you saw, even as you dissect it and analyze what went wrong.

THE SELECT (THE SUN ALSO RISES) ** 1/2 out of ****

ELEVATOR REPAIR SERVICE AT NEW YORK THEATRE WORKSHOP

ERS has famously tackled three modern classics of literature. The unlikely first book was William Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury*, which I unfortunately didn't see. The second was *The Great Gatsby* aka *Gatz*, one of the notable productions of last season. Now we have Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, that tale of doomed romance set against the backdrop of ex-pats living dissolutely in Paris and the bloody bullfighting in Spain. All the reservations that tickled the back of my brain while watching *Gatz* have come to the fore here and we see the strengths and weaknesses of ERS on full display.

Their strengths include a strong technical command of the theater. This show is very well directed by John Collins, with smart sets and costumes by David Zinn. Essentially, we have a bar, with a top shelf

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lined with a seemingly endless row of bottles. The many tables are filled with an array of glasses filled with all sorts of liquid, all of it consumed at one point or another. And the sound design by Matt Tierney & Ben Williams cannily combines snatches of music to set the mood; atmospheric noises to set the scene; and playful uses of sound like the pouring of liquids, the clinking of glasses and even the plopping of fish into a stream to keep the 3 and a half hour show moving briskly along as best it can. It's top-notch work.

But their weaknesses include a refusal to adapt and a related reluctance to develop a point of view. Gatz made it a point of pride to perform every single word of the novel. This show doesn't take that approach, but it sometimes feels like it. Why include the fishing trip diversion taken in the middle of the book? It provides some comic relief but adds nothing really to a theatrical adaptation that might focus on the doomed romance at the heart.

That romance is between the impotent, penniless journalist Jake Barnes (Mike Iveson) and the cool, worldly beauty Brett Ashley (Lucy Taylor), who wanders from man to man but always returns for a chaste reunion with the one man she can never truly have. Iveson handles the herculean task of his role easily, but simply doesn't command the stage the way Scott Shepherd did in *Gatz*. It doesn't help that his character is so passive. But the changes in tone are neck-snapping. One scene is played for drama, the next for buffoonish comic effect (our hero slugging back bottles of wine), the next quiet, the next filled with anachronistic dancing just to liven the mood.

Williams as Bill Gorton is terrifically fun and hints at a tone that might have worked: he doesn't satirize the Hemingway prose but mines it for humor and presents the manly, lean prose with a warm appreciation. Vin Knight is good as the genial Count Mippipopolous but on less solid ground with the more satirical hotel owner Montoya. A pity since seeing Jake fall out of favor with Montoya is one of the subtle pleasures of the book; it fails to register here at all. No wonder. Some scenes feel like a spoof; others feel like tragedy. Does Susie Sokol really have to shove a dildo down her pants to play a bullfighter? Is it meant to be humorous or do they fear we won't remember she's playing a boy? The effect is juvenile.

That's the show's problem: a refusal to commit to this as tragedy or comedy or some distinctive combination. Instead, it feels like a mishmash of styles when Hemingway is anything but. A number of scenes work wonderfully on their own, like Kate Scelsa's tirade as Frances or the bullfighting scene in which they had the inspired idea to give our hero a microphone so he can deliver his dialogue like the radio play by play it becomes. Too much smarts are on display to dismiss this intriguing, frustrating work. But does it satisfy Hemingway or us? No.

SWEET AND SAD ** out of ****

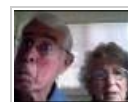
THE PUBLIC THEATER

Playwright Richard Nelson returns to the Apple family, the brothers and sisters (and uncle and lovers) who congregate in Rhinebeck, New York on important occasions. Their first play -- *That Hopey Changey Thing* -- took place on the night of the 2010 mid-term elections. This one took place on the actual date that the play premiered, that is, September 11, 2011.

The family is much the same. The three sisters -- all teachers at one time or another -- gently poke and pry into each other's lives, jealous of any attention paid to the others. The brother Richard, a lawyer, is feeling the stress of his new high-paying job after years of public service in the Attorney General's office. And Uncle Benjamin continues to slide quietly and quite pleasantly into a fog of forgetfulness.

One sister has been struck by tragedy, another has just reunited with an actor boyfriend, Richard is losing his vision and so on and so forth. It's a mere slip of a play, comfortably unassuming when it traffics in sibling gamesmanship but unable to bear the weight of what it's "really" about when the play dives into political hot water, 9-11 and the like. I have deliberately not named the sisters because they are so vaguely similar to me. Yes, one has been flattened by pain, another tries to be a little bossy, but they remain three sisters, three teachers and one would be hard-pressed to tell them apart.

The first play hinted at divisions to come with Richard possibly being groomed as a Republican candidate for higher office (Republican!) and another bravely admitting she didn't even vote in the mid-terms, despite the high stakes. But those early warnings have not borne fruit. Richard still softly inserts some prickly opinions but no one has joined the Tea Party or otherwise rocked the boat of this decidedly liberal enclave. When someone wonders why the government is paying money to the families that lost loved ones on 9-11 (the victims, not the first responders or the volunteers who now suffer ill health for working on the pile), the audience became quiet and focused. But this is not a show for pushing boundaries. They simply raise some questions. There's no doubt that the decision is right to these people; their only debate



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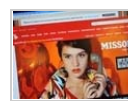
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is how best to phrase the reasons for it. That's how gingerly Nelson treads.

Given such vague pronouncements, the cast is similarly vague and professional. Maryann Plunkett, Laila Robins and J. Smith-Cameron provide varying levels of specificity to their roles, as much as can be expected. The generally solid Shuler Hensley tries to milk emotion out of a rather random anecdote about Yiddish books being reclaimed.

Jay O. Sanders -- always a dependable actor -- shines brighter in one of the better-defined roles as Richard. And as in the first play, the best moment belongs to Uncle Benjamin, a once-successful actor who has all but lost his memory. The best scene in the first show involved his discussion of how amnesia is almost a preferred state of mind for an actor. Here, actor Jon Devries makes the most of a fascinating moment where Uncle Benjamin is reading back his own words from an interview he gave earlier that day or the day before to one of the sisters about his life, a sort of casual oral history project. Both the interview and the memories he is reading about are startlingly new to him even though he spoke about them hours ago. It's a genuinely fresh and moving dramatic moment, something that occurs too infrequently in this modest enterprise.

The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four star scale)

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Broadway By The Year: 1997 ** 1/2

Cymbeline at Barrow Street Theatre ***

Hair ***

Hero: The Musical * 1/2

Master Class w Tyne Daly ** 1/2

Measure For Measure/Shakespeare in the Park ***

Olive and The Bitter Herbs ** 1/2

One Arm ***

The Select (The Sun Also Rises) ** 1/2

Silence! The Musical * 1/2

Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark * 1/2

Sweet and Sad **

Unnatural Acts ***

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The Bardy Bunch **

Books On Tape ** 1/2

Civilian **

Hard Travelin' With Woody ***

Leonard Cohen Koans *** 1/2

Paper Cuts ***

Parker & Dizzy's Fabulous Journey To The End Of The Rainbow ** 1/2

Rachel Calof ** 1/2

Romeo & Juliet: Choose Your Own Ending **

2 Burn * 1/2

Walls and Bridges **

What The Sparrow Said ** 1/2

Yeast Nation ***

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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