



MONDAY, OCTOBER 08, 2018

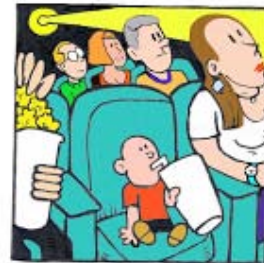
MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: Bill Irwin Clowns (A Little), The Constitution Oppresses (A Lot) And "The Winning Side" Doesn't

ON BECKETT *** out of ******WHAT THE CONSTITUTION MEANS TO ME** ** out of ******THE WINNING SIDE** * out of ******ON BECKETT** *** out of ******IRISH REPERTORY THEATRE**

Let's make one thing clear: this is not a play. Actor and clown Bill Irwin is giving a lecture, a talk or if it sounds less threatening a discussion of playwright Samuel Beckett. It's true Irwin delivers excerpts of pieces by Beckett and even clowns around a bit, but this is very much not an evening of theater. It's subtitled "exploring the works of Samuel Beckett" and that's just about right. I emphasize this because I spent about half of this event recalibrating what I was seeing. I'm sure audiences who are wise enough to attend will enjoy it a whole lot more if they know precisely what to expect.

When did lectures go out of fashion? At the turn of the 20th century, going to a lecture or talk or public speech was quite the thing. Obviously radio and TV and even the wide availability of books made that less necessary. And yes you can still go see lectures and talks but usually you'll be in a college setting or catch someone plugging a book. Outside of David Sedaris tours, the idea of going to see a public figure weigh in on a topic has faded from view.



Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in NYC and can be reached at mgiltz@pipeline.com

FAVORITE LINKS

[Americablog](#)[Five O'Clock Lightning baseball blog](#)[Deep Pop -- Lori Lakin's Blog](#)[The Back Page -- Jason Page on ESPN Radio](#)[Cine-Blog -- George Robinson's Blog](#)[Documents On Art & Cinema - Daryl Chin's Blog](#)[Brucie G's Wondrous Blog Of Adventure and Mystery -- Bruce Greenspan's Blog](#)

BLOG ARCHIVE

[► 2019 \(7\)](#)[▼ 2018 \(34\)](#)[► December \(7\)](#)



What a pity since hearing Bill Irwin share his thoughts on Beckett is fascinating and enlightening. He charmingly introduces the event and performs selections from eight different works, all the while sharing his thoughts on Beckett's voice, the experience of acting in his plays (often, Irwin says, actors will finish a run and insist they were terrible and immediately wonder when they can do it again), the debate on how to pronounce "Godot," the mind-twisting fact that this most Irish of writers wrote his work in French (!), the art of clowning, the pleasure of baggy pants, Beckett's early and powerful exposure to vaudeville and again and again the delightful puzzle of why and how this work speaks so forcefully to Irwin. One answer he gives? No, he doesn't love despair; he loves characters who face up to despair and soldier on as best they can.

Then I thought I spotted the sly, savvy actor in Irwin, despite his charming, self-effacing aura. Young actor Finn O'Sullivan joins Irwin very briefly when doing a scene from "Godot" that features a messenger boy. After it ended, Irwin brought O'Sullivan back out for a quick bow and joshes with him before sending the lad on his way. Ahh, I thought. Smart! O'Sullivan rightly gets his moment in the spotlight, doesn't have to wait around for the final bow...and at the end of the show Irwin will have the applause all to himself. But, no. At the end of the evening O'Sullivan comes back out and they take their bows together. That makes Irwin's earlier gesture all the more generous. Maybe that self-effacement wasn't an act after all.

Irwin's performances are sharp and entertaining here, such as when he demonstrates various ways one can tackle a certain bit or admits trying to set Beckett's dialogue to some new internal rhythm like rap or a waltz. (It just doesn't work.) His insights are many and the sharing of an actor's process (or at least this particular actor's process) is a treat. With just a spare stage, a few props and spot-on lighting (courtesy Michael Gottlieb), this master class in acting and Beckett is a treat. It's the best lecture in town!

WHAT THE CONSTITUTION MEANS TO ME ** out of ****
NEW YORK THEATRE WORKSHOP

- ▶ [November](#) (4)
 - ▼ [October](#) (6)
 - [THEATER: "Thunderbodies!" and the Glorious Mess of...](#)
 - [THEATER: 'Fact' Vs Fiction; Pale "India"](#)
 - [THEATER: "Love's Labour's Lost"...But A Good Meal ...](#)
 - [THEATER: "Mother Of The Maid" Lacks Fire](#)
 - [THEATER: "Oklahoma" Is \(Just\) OK](#)
 - [THEATER: Bill Irwin Clowns \(A Little\), The Constit...](#)
 - ▶ [September](#) (1)
 - ▶ [May](#) (5)
 - ▶ [April](#) (6)
 - ▶ [March](#) (4)
 - ▶ [February](#) (1)
 - ▶ [2017](#) (6)
 - ▶ [2016](#) (2)
 - ▶ [2015](#) (14)
 - ▶ [2014](#) (2)
 - ▶ [2013](#) (5)
 - ▶ [2012](#) (18)
 - ▶ [2011](#) (15)
 - ▶ [2010](#) (10)
 - ▶ [2009](#) (43)
 - ▶ [2008](#) (86)
 - ▶ [2007](#) (781)
 - ▶ [2006](#) (2412)
 - ▶ [2005](#) (5)
-

What a frustrating and unsatisfying bit of theater this proved for me, in an interesting way. It's a pity since the conceit and the politics and the painfully timely nature of a show looking at our Constitution and our government -- well, it's all catnip to me. Writer and star Heidi Schreck spent her childhood going from VFW hall to VFW hall debating other kids and winning scholarship money for college. Indeed, she paid her way through school on the winnings. But what would her present-day self think of the Constitution compared to her admittedly smart but still much younger and perhaps less cynical 15 year old version?

And so we get *What The Constitution Means To Me*, with Schreck in the heightened VFW hall of her dreams (the sets are by Rachel Hauck), delivering the debate speech she gave so many years ago but with the interruptions and asides she couldn't say at the time, along with the hard-won wisdom and a more nuanced sense of history Schreck has gathered since then.

It's all very meta. Schreck is playing her younger self, though as she explains she won't be "playing" a 15 year old as such. (Though she does amusingly speed up her delivery as time runs out or feel sweetly earnest at times, all of which reads "teen debater.") But then Schreck veers off and isn't delivering that long-ago speech. She's talking about her private life, the violence her mother witnessed as a child, the violence her grandmother endured, the abortion Schreck couldn't bring herself to tell her mom about at the time, the statistics on violence against women in this country and much more. Sometimes she's just a more informed debater; sometimes she's left the debate far behind and tears up at the memory of the degradation women in her family's history have faced or even how she had sex with a guy she really didn't want to because -- as she jokes -- it seemed the polite thing to do. Then she returns to that moment and clarifies that some inner voice told her not to die, to be scared for her life and do what she must to survive.



It's all emotional and sincere and briefly harrowing and often funny. It's also completely artificial. I might blame Schreck's performance but I don't think there's anything particularly wrong with it. I didn't buy it, but I didn't mind it. It's the very structure and conceit of *What The Constitution Means To Me* that just doesn't work. We know Schreck is

"recreating" a moment from her younger self's life. So when she "impulsively" changes tack and starts sharing info from her current point of view, we know this is scripted. And while it feels unfair of me to say this, even her emotional moments feel scripted. Does she really wipe away tears thinking about her grandmother? Or is that simply a beat in the script? Frankly, I didn't even know if everything she said about her family was actually true.

And that's what proves so frustrating about this work of theater. I didn't want to doubt or wonder the truth of any of it. On one level, it shouldn't matter. On another level, if it worked I wouldn't care. But it didn't work and I was annoyed that I found myself wondering precisely what was true. At the end of the evening, a young female debater comes on stage and they tackle an issue and an audience member chooses a winner...and even THAT felt scripted and unconvincing. I assume every word of this confessional night is accurate. I certainly agree with the essential ideas she presented -- one of the most essential being that perhaps the Constitution was not created to slowly spread equal rights to all but simply to create a functioning society in which only the men who created it would enjoy the most power.

If Schreck had just come out and said, "Here's the speech I would give today at the VFW" and told her story, it might have been less dramatic but it would have been more effective. *What The Constitution Means To Me* is heartfelt and sincere and I agreed with most everything it espouses. But as theater? I didn't believe it for a minute.

THE WINNING SIDE * out of ****

EPIC THEATRE ENSEMBLE AT THEATRE ROW

The life of German rocket scientist Wernher von Braun is filled with moral complexity. He helped design the V-2 rockets that terrorized London during WW II. But then he also helped the US launch a rocket to the moon, inspiring not just Americans but truly the entire world. The bizarre reality of his journey is almost hard to grasp. Did he really go from a Nazi to a celebrated figure on Walt Disney's TV show in the 1950s, just one decade after the end of the war? A black satire, a penetrating drama -- the possibilities of how to tell his story are endless.

The Winning Side captures none of this in a flat, un-involving play that skims over the surface of von Braun's questionable life, saving any attempt to hold his feet to the fire for a confusing, haphazard final few minutes. Indeed, this play by James Wallert jumps back and forth in time in a confusing fashion, as if Wallert himself isn't sure where to start. Mostly it toggles back and forth from post-war America to Nazi-occupied Paris, where von Braun (Sullivan Jones) is wooing and perhaps falling in love with French actress Margot Moreau (played by

Melissa Friedman). Also in the mix are Godfrey L. Simmons Jr. as von Braun's military contact and Devin E. Haqq as a about a dozen other characters.

In any case, von Braun woos Moreau and she resists. After all, he's a Nazi! If anything, the play very modestly does a better job of showing her moral dilemma than his. But even here it falls short since we are left to imagine she might be asking von Braun pointed questions and peeking into his briefcase for the Resistance. It seems she wasn't, but the possibility is so strong they should have cleared up that potential path to redemption early on. Even worse, we never quite learn the fate of Moreau when just a little bit of stage business would have cleared it up. Late in the play von Braun is in the US after being forced to leave her behind. (Forced? One never knows with von Braun.) She sends a note pleading for help and he...carefully puts the letter away. Does he do something later? Apparently not but having von Braun tear it up would have made that point clear. It would have also painted him as a villain and the show doesn't want to point fingers too easily.



But are they worried we might not like him or that we might? Wernher is put through the wringer only at the end. It's done so hurriedly I'm not sure most theater-goers will follow it. But for some reason I was already aware that von Braun oversaw a factory in which thousands suffered as slave labor, many of them tortured or killed. It was probably impossible for von Braun to not be aware of these atrocities. Yet that barely comes across here.

Long ago I realized how wrong it is to judge actors trapped in a bad play. Nonetheless, the cast sport some outrageous accents, including French and German and British. By the end, I wasn't even sure about their American voices. Sullivan Jones is certainly an appealing presence but the material doesn't even begin to allow him a chance to present a complex character. Most technical elements are ok though I did especially appreciate scenic designer Chika Shimizu's choice of placing a giant fan embedded in the top of the set so it could blow out air at the audience during key moments, like a rocket launch. (It reminded me of a ride at Disney World, ironically enough.)

A brief final stab at moral finger-wagging takes place -- but at the audience. Don't be so quick to judge von Braun, says the play. Instead of listing the many positives that came out of the space program, for

example, it say, Hey, the pyramids were made with enforced labor and many people died. No one is calling for them to be torn down, are they? Well, no, but this is a rather weak tangent of an argument to make.

In contrast, act two opens with a short ditty by songwriter and satirist Tom Lehrer. It lasts maybe two minutes but in that brief time Lehrer does more to illuminate and skewer the pliable ethics of von Braun than the rest of the play combined. If they were afraid the show might have us tut-tutting at von Braun, they needn't have worried. *The Winning Side* barely lays a glove on him. Werner von Braun wins. Again.

THEATER OF 2018

Homelife/The Zoo Story (at Signature) *** out of ****

[Escape To Margaritaville](#) **

[Broadway By The Year: 1947 and 1966](#) ***

[Lobby Hero](#) ***

[Frozen](#) **

[Rocktopia](#) *

[Angels in America](#) ** 1/2

[Mean Girls](#) ** 1/2

[The Sting](#) **

[Mlima's Tale](#) ** 1/2

[Children Of A Lesser God](#) ** 1/2

[Sancho: An Act Of Remembrance](#) ** 1/2

[The Metromaniacs](#) ***

[Summer: The Donna Summer Musical](#) *

[The Seafarer](#) **

[Henry V \(Public Mobile Unit w Zenzi Williams\)](#) * 1/2

[Saint Joan](#) **

[Travesties](#) *** 1/2

[Summer and Smoke](#) ** 1/2

[My Fair Lady](#) ** 1/2

[Broadway By The Year: 1956 and 1975](#) ** 1/2

[Bernhard/Hamlet](#) * 1/2

[On Beckett](#) ***

[What The Constitution Means To Me](#) **

[The Winning Side](#) *

Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the creator of BookFilter, a book lover's to BookFilter! Need a smart and easy gift? Head to BookFilter! Wondering w categories, like cookbooks and mystery and more? Head to BookFilter! It's a you do in a physical bookstore, provides comprehensive info on new releases e personal recommendations every step of the way. It's like a fall book preview category. He's also the cohost of Showbiz Sandbox, a weekly pop culture podc of the day with top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available for Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called i

Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that the shows are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.

POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 9:41 PM 

NO COMMENTS:

[Post a Comment](#)

[Newer Post](#)

[Home](#)

[Older Post](#)

Subscribe to: [Post Comments \(Atom\)](#)