



MONDAY, OCTOBER 07, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: The Not-So "Great Society"

THE GREAT SOCIETY ** out of ****

VIVIAN BEAUMONT THEATER AT LINCOLN CENTER

Just as the odds were always stacked against politician Lyndon Baines Johnson, they're stacked against the new Broadway play *The Great Society*. It's a sequel or, if you prefer, a companion piece to the Tony-winning drama *All The Way*.

Now, Robert Schenkkan's *All The Way* lasered in on one of LBJ's greatest achievements: the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. That was a crowning achievement of Johnson's life and indeed in many ways the life of the United States. And a drama about its passage allowed that political animal to charm, cajole, arm-twist, maneuver, manipulate and scheme scheme scheme...but in the service, for once, of the greater good. Imagine Richard III, but with our best interests at heart.

Then have this complicated man played in scenery-chewing Technicolor by actor Bryan Cranston. *All The Way* had plenty of flaws, delivering history and major characters in a breathless, un-nuanced rush. But LBJ was a hell of a lot of fun to watch as he towered over and dominated everyone around him. No wonder *All The Way* scored Tonys for both Best Actor and Best Play.

Now here comes *The Great Society*. And the fun and the victories are over.

Here LBJ is smaller in every way. (And not just because the excellent actor Brian Cox is a few inches shorter than Cranston -- they're both shorter than the lumbering LBJ, after all.) The President is beleaguered on all sides, pushed this way and that. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Bobby Kennedy outflank him on the left. The Dixiecrats and the Republicans snipe at him from the right. Instead of controlling events, he is overwhelmed by them.



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

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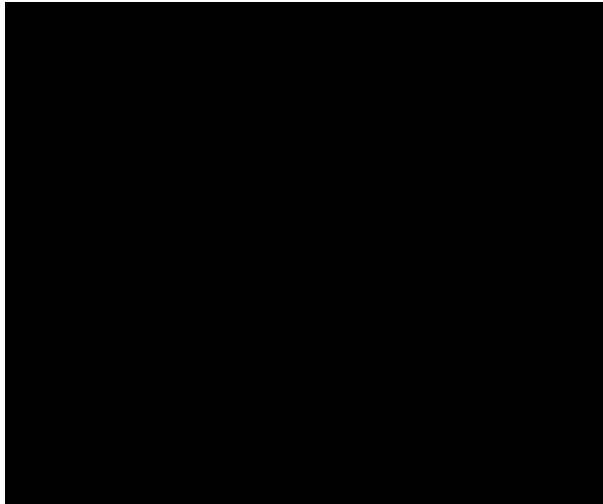
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And every step he takes, this tragic figure sinks deeper and deeper into the muck and mire of Vietnam. *The Great Society* covers a lot of history and features 50 or so speaking parts. But what will you remember? The simple, devastating tally of the wounded and dead US soldiers in that war, numbers that mount higher and higher and higher all night long.



Plays don't have to be about triumphs to be good, of course. But an exuberant main character can paper over a lot of flaws. Not this time. A pallid, helpless LBJ squawks and complains and bickers and fights. But he doesn't hold your attention. As with *All The Way*, other characters dominate the action for lengthy stretches. Happily, LBJ wasn't the only hero of that drama, not with MLK inspiring and campaigning and demanding equal rights.

Yet here MLK (a fine Grantham Coleman) is just as beset as LBJ, with Stokely Carmichael drawing the spotlight with his own more fiery rhetoric. Bobby Kennedy might have been a fine foil for Johnson. But their almost animalistic hatred of each other is only glancingly covered here. Bryce Pinkham is a compelling presence, but that's all he can be. The actor spends much of the play simply sitting and watching, until history cruelly sidelines Bobby forever.

Many good actors tackle multiple roles to little or no effect, with even Richard Thomas barely registering as Vice President Hubert Humphrey. You sense the play sort of suggesting how LBJ twists Humphrey around his finger, sometimes slapping the man down and other times pretending they're a team and how LBJ really *needs* him. As with so much else here, that idea is telegraphed and described, but never comes to life.

Nor does the play, which pinballs from one major event to another. It's all glancingly done, with each moment in history having almost the

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same weight as any other. Typical of so many roles, LBJ's wife Lady Bird pops in and out from time to time. And yes, she has one firm moment insisting quite rightly that J. Edgar Hoover should not be trusted. But her role is so decorative, so unnecessary, you wonder why she's there at all.

Obviously, great drama could be built from the decline and fall of LBJ. He goes from the peak of the 1964 election (the biggest popular vote victory in modern times) to a President truly hated and distrusted by much of the country. Nonetheless, the tragedy of Vietnam and LBJ's role in it never comes to life. Watching Robert McNamara and the military blandly ask for one "minor" increase after another in troop size doesn't cut it.

Neither, sadly, does Cox. He's enjoying great acclaim right now in the HBO drama *Succession*. And I've been rewatching *Deadwood*, where he cuts a dandy of a figure in an arc during Season Three. Cox is unquestionably a terrific actor. But he was off his game the night I saw, stumbling over lines multiple times. In a way, Cox seems just as lost as LBJ, surely wondering how the heck he got stuck here. How did it all go so wrong? Schenck might well be wondering the same thing.

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