



MONDAY, APRIL 16, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: "MLIMA'S TALE" OF SHAME; "CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD"

**MLIMA'S TALE** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**MLIMA'S TALE** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**PUBLIC THEATER**

It begins so promisingly. A simple stark stage. An actor, posed in a contorted way that somehow suggests the Kenyan elephant the show is named after. Offstage but visible, the composer and musician Justin Hicks breathes arrestingly into a microphone, calling to mind the wind and a storm and the anguished cry of a beast in distress all at once. You sit up straight.

A gorgeous moon is in the sky and that actor -- Sahr Ngaujah of *Fela!* -- addresses us, sharing his plight as a magnificent, tusked creature hunted for his ivory, a noble character who stays away from his family to shield them from danger. "My distance is my weapon," he says with pride and sadness mingled.

Soon we move from the elephant to the hunters tracking him and waiting for Mlima to die from the poison they've used. And the hunters lead us to the corrupt chief of police who hired them and on to the public official in Kenya who wants to blame the death of Mlima on Somalis and on to the clerk at the port, the middleman, the artist hungry to carve those tusks and right on to the wealthy wife who wants a showpiece for the entrance to her new home. This *La Ronde*-style chain of provenance establishes the guilt of everyone involved in the slaughter of elephants -- however much they explain away their personal choices. Mlima lived a long life but he never stood a chance.

Ultimately, neither does the show. It has style and presence and runs a nimble 80 minutes: unlike Nottage's last play -- the Pulitzer Prize-



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winning *Sweat* -- it does not belabor its points. But they remain lecture points and the aura of an After-School Special is heavy. After a modest amount of nuance granted to the hunters (they are doing what they've always done for generations and quickly get screwed over by more powerful people), pretty much everyone else is guilty and uninterestingly so. They may not be moustache-twirling villains, but villains they are.

That's the problem with *La Ronde* itself and as a structure for a work of art. The entire point becomes merely carrying the story forward person by person, link by link. You can establish a character in just a few words but when they disappear after two scenes, it's hard to develop them or make the audience care. Ngaujah is always there as a ghost-like presence to stare balefully at one and all, but the other actors -- Kevin Mambo, a stand-out Jojo Gonzalez and Ito Aghayere -- merely slip in and out of characters as quickly as they slip in and out of their clothes.



(photo © by Joan Marcus)

Happily, *Mlima's Tale* has some strong stagecraft to maintain our interest. Director Jo Bonney keeps the show brisk, despite the monologues and Kenyan proverbs flashed onto the set that might have leant the evening a portentous air. Full credit to Riccardo Hernandez for some marvelous scenic design, memorable lighting by Lap Chi Chu and the sound design of Darron L. West working in concert with the excellent score by Hicks.

They support the exceptional Ngaujah, so you never doubt for a moment his regal stature as one of the last of the long-lived elephants and a national treasure for Kenya. When he poses on stage for the various people eying his tusks, the echo of the slave trade is fitting and affecting. That works because it's theatrical and unspoken. Most everything else is spelled out and underlined for our edification, though who will feel enlightened by learning some wealthy people spend obscene amounts of money to obtain illegal works of art and don't care about where they came from? Even the closest we have to a good human -- the warden tasked with protecting Mlima -- can be

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► 2010 (10)

► 2009 (43)

► 2008 (86)

► 2007 (781)

► 2006 (2412)

► 2005 (5)

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qualified as merely trying to protect his job or just not wanting to look impotent.

While succinct and never quite dull, thanks to the talent involved, *Mlima's Tale* is a dramatically static essay that offers no specific details about the ivory trade that will astonish anyone. I was far more engaged by Mlima's *life*, which we hear about mostly at the start. His mother calls him handsome but this is a warning, he tells us, for his beauty will make him more appealing to hunters. He fights with another elephant for so long that they become exhausted and have no choice but to be friends. He sneezes upon first sensing the acrid stench of humans. He pursued his love -- the elephant Mumbi -- for a week before she succumbed to his charms. And it is heart-rending to see that when Mlima is poisoned and tracked by hunters he must stay away from his family. He hopes they understand why. All of this comes in the first and most potent two scenes of the show. Here is the fresh and surprising story Nottage might have told, a character we've never seen before. If only this play had ended with Mlima's death, rather than begun with it.

**CHILDREN OF A LESSER GOD \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\***  
**STUDIO 54/ROUNABOUT THEATRE**

What a confusing, fascinating and frustrating play you'll find in the revival of Mark Medoff's one major success, the 1979 Tony winner *Children of A Lesser God*. Somehow it manages to be both ahead of its time, sadly relevant and weirdly behind the times all at once. Medoff and Hesper Anderson adapted and improved on the play for the Oscar-winning feature film starring Marlee Matlin and William Hurt.

Both are about a young deaf woman who refuses on principle to talk vocally and the speech therapist she falls in love with. Yet this is the original play, replete with the debate in the Deaf community about how much to accommodate the hearing world, along with office and sexual politics that come across a lot more awkwardly than they must have in 1979. It's cumbersome, generally well-acted, saddled with a dreadful set design and I doubt any of this matters. *Children Of A Lesser God* is more than a "problem play," but it still has problems and always will. Happily, it also has two solid lead roles and an excellent Lauren Ridloff and a solid Joshua Jackson do well by their characters.

James (Jackson) is a passionate, unconventional teacher who gets great results working with deaf kids who are learning to speak. But Sarah (Ridloff) is older than his other students, a beautiful young woman. And she has no interest in learning to speak. She doesn't want to do anything she can't do well and since Sarah was born deaf, vocalizing will never be a strong suit for her. Besides, why should she have to learn to speak? Why can't hearing people learn to sign?

James is struck by her beauty, challenged by her politics and engaged by her wit. Instead of another dull classroom session, he invites her out to dinner and soon they are mixing business with pleasure. (Rather uncomfortably so, from our current perspective.) Soon James is offering Sarah a life she never really imagined as a wife and perhaps mother, with James as her personal interpreter to the hearing world.

Her friend Orin (a passionate John McGinty) wants to agitate for more Deaf teachers and other changes at the school (or is it an institution?) where they reside. Will Sarah forget her Deaf friends? Will James get in trouble with his boss Mr. Franklin (Anthony Edwards) for fraternizing with a student, even if she is 21 years old? And deep down, is James always hoping and expecting he can convince Sarah to use her voice, to speak? And will that be a step forward for her...or a step back?



(photo © by Matthew Murphy)

It's very, very hard to "unpack" the issues of this play. (Dreadful word, that.) The debate in the Deaf community is sadly just as relevant today as it was almost 40 years ago. Precious little progress has been made with the Hearing community, though certain technological advances (the internet, subtitling) might count as practical if not cultural progress. On the plus side, the question of assimilation, of what one gives up to be accepted will always be universal for marginalized people. Yet the minute you try and see the insight the show can offer, other pressing issues come to the fore, like the fact that James is quickly seducing a young woman he's supposed to be teaching and thus has authority over. (She lives and works at the school as a maid).

Worse, another student seems much younger, but James lets her drink beer and be sexually suggestive without truly addressing her needs appropriately. His boss (Edwards) comes across vaguely when not being a jerk, though it's hard to know if he's just being blunt or intended as the nominal villain. So you focus on the romance, but then Sarah is enraptured by a blender like any good little housewife and feels reduced, along with women in general. Her story of the sex she had with numerous men when she was younger is hard to parse in this #MeToo era. Is it more sexually liberated (which is how it plays here --

Sarah owns her sexual pleasure) or is it abusive on the men's part?

And the biggest problem of all is that the whole damn thing takes place in the mind of James. He is reflecting back on the woman he loved and lost and hopes to get back. That's all fine and a simple black box would have served us well. Yet the dreadful scenic design by the deserved Tony winner Derek McLane is a disaster: for some reason, it's lit in moody blues and hot pink and looks like South Florida circa *Miami Vice*. Instead of a vague no-man's land, it feels like a suburban mall and is impossible to put out of your mind. Thus no one can just pop into James's office or home -- every character's entrance feels weighted with symbolism the way a naturalistic set or no set at all would not have done. The score by Branford Marsalis (a favorite artist of mine) is a modest plus but the pre-existing music that appears throughout -- from Stevie Wonder to Paul McCartney to classical pieces -- feels oddly random and lacking in impact. Surely in a show about sound and the lack thereof, any music that is played should have major import. Not so here.

Worse, we're constantly adjusting our expectations about issues the play is raising versus the issues it had no clue would arise with future audiences. What we want is to simply follow the romance but that can't happen. Medoff keeps getting in his own way by piling on the backstory. Sarah is estranged from her mother, while her father abandoned the family over his daughter's deafness. James has his own heavy tale, with a mother that committed suicide (!) and a father he hasn't spoken to in years. Surely falling in love and navigating a new relationship should be enough, without tossing in family woes, legal battles and so much more.

On the bright side, sign language is simply a beautiful, expressive language and it's a pleasure to experience it. I can't speak to Jackson's fluidity in ASL, but he convinces as a thoroughly decent guy, if not the compelling rebel suggested in the text. Ridloff holds us from start to finish with her expressive face, body and signing. They are reason enough to see a play that makes their characters seem more confused than Medoff intended.

McGinty is also memorable as the rabble rouser Orin, though Treshelle Edmond is fuzzier as the student Lydia. She comes across as so young (is she 12? 15? 18?) that it's hard to understand James's dealings with her as anything other than clueless and thoughtless. Actually everyone other than the leads and Orin are fuzzy, from the lawyer (a fine Julee Cerda) to Edwards in the thankless role of the administrator to Kecia Lewis, who has little to do as Sarah's mother but be hurt and angry. That is surely the weakness of a play that has so very much to say but not quite the skill to say it well.

## **THEATER OF 2018**

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[Rocktopia](#) \*

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

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[The Sting](#) \*\*

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

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

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

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