



MONDAY, AUGUST 19, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

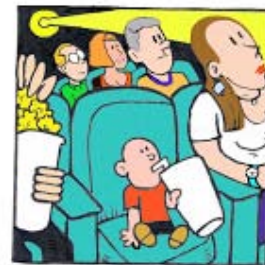
## THEATER: Jake Gyllenhaal and Tom Sturridge Grapple With Death and Life

SEA WALL/A LIFE \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
HUDSON THEATRE

What's not to love? Two very talented actors tackle solo monologues in an evening of theater that offers love, death, laugh, perhaps a tear or two and some serious star power. Transferring from The Public, this work of theater keeps its intimacy mostly intact and amps up the humor just a tad to fill the wider space. Honestly, you'd always choose to see great actors perform in as small a space as possible unless a show *needed* to be big. But that doesn't change the fact that Tom Sturridge and Jake Gyllenhaal certainly make the Hudson Theatre (one of Broadway's tinier spaces) feel intimate.

Simon Stephens (*The Curious Incident of the Dog In The Night-Time*) wrote the probing, philosophical work *Sea Wall* for his friend Andrew Scott in 2017. Scott, already popular from *Sherlock*, turned it into a barn-burning showcase that became a sensation in London on its own. Scott has gone on to a well-deserved meteoric rise as the "hot priest" in the TV series *Fleabag*.

Now that monologue is paired with Nick Payne's *A Life* to create a full evening. Payne (*Constellations*) has been championed by Gyllenhaal who appears here in that work alongside Sturridge, who has the unenviable task of following Scott. Both works are haunted by death but they are very different. In this production directed by Carrie Cracknell, *Sea Wall* is more ambitious but less successful while *A Life* aims lower but hits its mark more readily. The chance to see two fine actors up close makes it all worthwhile.



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Sturridge is a very talented actor (nominated for Tonys and Baftas) who has been wasted on the forgettable TV show *Sweetbitter* and a string of movies that haven't quite brought him to the next level. Yet. Here he tackles the tale of Alex, a new father describing a holiday with his wife, daughter and prickly father-in-law. Alex keeps veering into musings about life and fate...and when someone is angry about the idea that everything has a purpose or happens for a reason, you just know some tragedy is going to unfold.

Sturridge is very appealing but the transitions back and forth from the specific and concrete to more rarified ideas prove awkward. Whether it's the writing or Sturridge not hitting his stride yet, the seams are showing. That doesn't keep the awful darkness at its heart from having a painful impact. Sturridge does manage the tricky task of revealing awful grief without wallowing in it. These pieces are not misery porn, as some suggest. They're too open-hearted and wise for that.

Gyllenhaal's piece immediately lightens the tone, with its more amiable story of Abe, a soon-to-be father overwhelmed as he and his wife prepare for the birth of their first child. *A Life* also flashes back to the death of Abe's own dad years ago and their loving relationship. The laughs come easier here, with Gyllenhaal such a magnetic charmer we're always on his side, even when Abe makes a potentially tragic mistake. He's such a smart performer, with Gyllenhaal's choices in theater and film proving impeccable. His commitment to the work, to exploring a monologue and helping make this evening of theater happen shows a dedication to the theater that's inspiring.

Several minor details don't help. One of the few props on the bare stage is a piano. Gyllenhaal sits at it for a while before the show begins and then noodles on it at the very end. One anecdote from his monologue involves the song "Imagine" by John Lennon and Yoko Ono. At the finale, he hints at that melody and then moves off, crooning a wordless tune. It doesn't quite work, so perhaps actually playing (but *not* singing) "Imagine" would be better? That's followed by a visual flourish that brings both actors on stage at the same time but physically isolated from one another, staring off into opposite directions. Behind them a video projection of an apartment building is

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seen, window upon window peeking into other lives. It suggests that these are just two stories of many, that we all have tales of love and death and happiness and sorrow.

But we knew that. After watching two actors bring us in close with their talent, it was an uninteresting and banal bit of fireworks wholly out of whack with the nicely modest performances that came before. Why bother? Neither moment (the music or the projection) mattered much, but they tilted the evening just a bit towards 2 1/2 stars instead of the more generous 3 stars it was headed for.

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POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 12:30 AM 

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