



MONDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: "The Sound Inside" Gets Muffled By Finale

**THE SOUND INSIDE** \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**STUDIO 54**

Pulitzer finalist Adam Rapp molds his new play out of very familiar clay.

Bella is a lonely academic and writer at Yale just told she has terminal cancer. One novel, many years ago, received acclaim (though not from the New York Times) and Bella has trudged along ever since. Single, quietly sad, artistically dead and now a future of chemotherapy followed by death? What's the point?

Christopher is a lonely student. Wildly opinionated like only college students can be, Christopher has no friends, despises the internet, loves Bella's lone novel, hates to be touched and is working on a book of his own in a frenzy of youthful passion.

You can fill in the rest. However, even the most familiar of stories becomes fresh when told with flair. As it unfolds, those well-worn cliches come to life again and you think, yes, ok, I'm going with it. Then, heartbreakingly, it stumbles in the home stretch, enough to make you rethink some of your earlier appreciation. The fault lies with Rapp. This is an impeccable, beautifully acted production of a flawed work.

A two-hander, it begins on a mostly bare stage with Bella wandering outdoors, pen and paper in hand, working out some ideas for a story. Showing artists at work is always hard. At least painters can slap on some paint or musicians can bring a new song to life. Writers can only scribble away. But Rapp manages the feat nicely, with Bella pausing to reword some idea, add a flourish or scratch one out as the moment demands.



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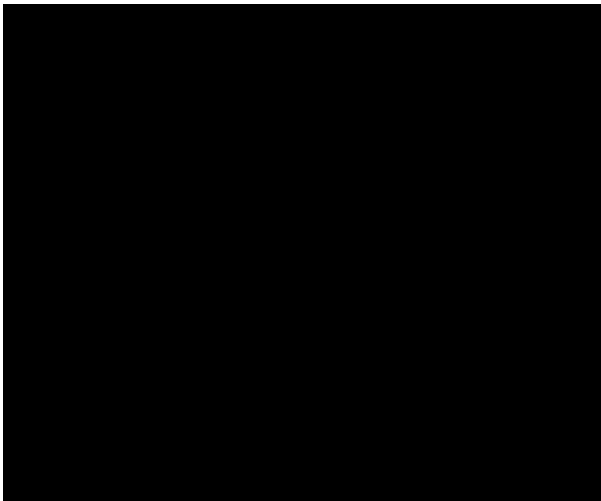
It helps that Bella is played by Mary-Louise Parker, easily one of the best actors working today and a very good writer herself. (Her literary memoir *Dear Mr. You* is a delight and I trust she's working on a new novel or stories or *something* else of her own.) Parker exudes intelligence and her Bella is wry, self-aware and utterly convincing on every level.

As Bella shares her story, sets materialize out of the darkness, such as a professor's crammed office, a living room, a park and so on. Every technical element shines here: the scenic design of Alexander Woodward, the lighting of Heather Gilbert, the spot-on costumes of David Hyman and the deft music and sound of Daniel Kluger (hot off his marvelous new arrangements and orchestrations for *Oklahoma!*).

Overseen by the invisible hand of director David Cromer, the effect is positively magical, with sets floating into vision just when needed and quietly slipping away when their work is done. Without any flash, it feels just like memory or a writer's imagination at work. Everyone is in top form.

So *The Sound Inside* begins as a person-facing-cancer story until the insecure Christopher shoves his way in. He detours the story into several tantalizing possibilities: a romance beginning just as life is ending, a teacher/student tutorial on life and the craft of writing as Bella's final act, the tortured writer run out of things to say faced with a dazzling protégé handing over the sole copy of his first (brilliant) novel?

Actor Will Hochman plays Christopher, a role Jesse Eisenberg would have gobbled up fifteen years ago. You might say he goes toe to toe with Parker and holds his own, but that misses the teamwork on display. They are wonderfully in sync throughout. Hochman matches Parker but this isn't remotely a contest; their camaraderie at the curtain call says all you need to know. It's an impressive Broadway debut. And for, oh, 80% of the night, it's a very impressive play.



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## SPOILER ALERTS

It's impossible to discuss the flaws of the play without ruining the plot and the finale. If you have a chance to see the show in New York City, by all means take the time. You'll see Parker in top form and a strong new talent in Hochman. Afterwards you can debate with your friends (or me) about the last "act" of this brisk, entertaining 90 minute evening of drama.

Ok, here we go. Seriously, I'm going to describe every twist of the play right to the end. At one point as Bella and Christopher become friends, colleagues in writing (of a sort) and perhaps more, she invites him out to dinner and then back to her place for a drink and more discussion. Christopher mentions a girl in high school (it didn't work out) and a young woman in college who dumps him for a member of the glee club. "You've been Whiffenpoofed," Bella deadpans. Christopher teeters on the edge of self-absorbed and annoying, but Hochman reins this in with a performance that allows us to empathize with the human emotions roiling underneath Christopher's would-be misanthropy.

He's not an incel (that is, a guy who is misogynistic and self-loathing to a dangerous degree) and heck, he might even be a little asexual. Christopher blurts out at one point that he's about as sexual as your average parking meter. But then he cautiously reaches out and brushes Bella's cheek. She quietly leaves the room, brings back a pillow and sheets so he can crash on her couch and then goes to bed. It's not a rejection so much as an end to the evening. Yet, it's a while before they reconnect.

When Christopher finally comes back to have another dinner with Bella, he brings the only copy of his novella, typed on a manual typewriter and thus the sole copy in the world, as he makes clear. He's eager for Bella's opinion. Instead, she tells Christopher about the terminal cancer, her refusal to punish herself with pointless chemotherapy and asks him to help her commit suicide. She's bought everything needed from the internet but needs Christopher to be her "injection buddy," the essential partner to make it all go smoothly. Oh, and she wants to do it that very night.

Christopher agrees, but insists she read his work first and give a complete and frank assessment. She does and it's a masterpiece. In plays like this, college students *always* produce masterpieces. Then Bella is injected with the first needle putting her to sleep...and wakes up fifteen or so hours later. Christopher is gone and later discovered dead, facedown in the snow. Bellas' cancer miraculously goes into remission and she's left with his novella, a work she quietly noted earlier has no copyright, no indication that anyone else on the planet even knows it exists. (He had no friends whatsoever and even stopped going to his classes.)

Bella is wandering through the park and keeps thinking of

- ▶ [June](#) (3)
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Christopher's body, still working out in her mind how to describe the scene. "Did this park imagine his body?" she asks herself/the audience. "Would that be a better image?"

And so it ends. Why in heaven's name have I detailed every single plot point right up to the finale? Every possible complaint about *The Sound Inside* involves the final scenes, the moments that make you say, "Wait, what?"

Early on, Christopher insists the only way to become famous today is to commit suicide or be on Twitter. He then dives into a list of famous literary suicides. Never mind the endless list one can make of great writers who didn't commit suicide, it's just the sort of thing excitable college students like to proclaim as fact. But does that mean after creating his undeniable masterpiece Christopher chooses to seal his fame by offing himself? If so, Hochman's nicely modulated performance doesn't work. We don't think for a second that this character he plays is about to kill himself.

Maybe Christopher is lovelorn? Not really. Like Chekhov's gun, the moment where Christopher brushes Bella's cheek is the gun that never goes off. They're both lonely and a romance or at least a physical relationship is clearly a possibility. But Rapp doesn't have Bella reject Christopher in any definitive way. It's just an unexplored, unsatisfying option. And why did Bella invite Christopher to sleep on her couch? Couldn't he have just walked back to his place or Uber'd if it was farther? It's just another confusing signal for him and us.

If he's not aiming for fame or distraught over not becoming her lover, was his death just an accident? That would be deflating and uninteresting. On the night when Bella asks Christopher for help in killing herself ("Will I get extra credit?" I wanted him to ask), surely he could have said, "First, read my novella and then sleep with me. I can kill you tomorrow." And whatever happens as a result of that would surely be more consequential and rooted in who they are then the unresolved suggestions we're given.

The show annoyingly and rather obliquely suggests Bella might publish Christopher's work as her own. Again, either take that *Deathtrap* of a plot twist or don't. Being coy helps no one. And does her critique of his work have to be that it's an unalloyed masterpiece? Surely, she'd have something constructively helpful to suggest. Or God forbid, it might merely show "promise." Having Bella not rave about its towering brilliance would be reason enough for a weirdly deluded and vulnerable student to kill himself. So there she would be, finding a reason to live while dealing with her guilt and perhaps turning that into some new productive work of her own. How ironic and how far more satisfying than what we're given.

The worst possibility is that the entire evening is just a story being made up on the spot by Bella as she wanders in the night. That would

be fine, though the story she's telling has lots of inconsistencies. (See above.) Plus, it would be better if the show gracefully and openly acknowledged that fact; heck a meta ending might be satisfying as we realize this particular story is an act of imagination. Any sense of being "cheated" would be calmed by Rapp reminding us that every play is precisely that and nothing more.

For the many complaints the ending raises, none can be raised about the two actors. Hochman is very good. And Mary-Louise Parker is a joy. Both break the fourth wall, though Parker has the bulk of the work to do here, narrating her own story while guiding us through the ups and downs of her narrow, unhappy life. Deadpan, deadly serious, and deadly funny, Parker is wholly naturalistic throughout, never calling attention to herself. That's why you can't take your eyes off her.

In one scene, Parker is in a bar alone and chatting up a guy. The way she looks at him faux agreeably and then turns back to us is hilarious and speaks volumes. They go back to his miserable hotel to have sex, which she narrates to marvelous effect, including the fact that the TV is on the entire time and showing a rerun of *Everybody Loves Raymond* in which.... Here Parker squints as she struggles to make out the TV screen and tells us they're in the kitchen as Ray's wife announces she's invited both of her divorced parents for Thanksgiving dinner. That squint, that moment in which Parker is so present in the scene she's creating for us by herself on stage, is so typical of her greatness. (Again, the technical team is right there with her every step of the way.)

Another is the scene where Bella joins her students in an exercise and finds herself writing the same sentence over and over again: Listen to the sound inside. Listen to the sound inside. Parker repeats it over and over, the words fill up the stage in a beautiful projection by Aaron Rhine and the effect is hypnotic. When it's over, Bella drolly admits, "I have no idea what it means." Well, I have no idea what it means either. And I have no idea what Rapp was thinking at the end. Out of unpromising stuff, he crafted a thoroughbred of a play that breaks your heart by stumbling just before the finish line. But with this cast and creative team, she's a beauty to watch while she runs.

## **THEATER OF 2019**

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[Ink: Under The Radar Festival at the Public](#) \*\* 1/2

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[White Noise](#) \*\* 1/2

[Kiss Me, Kate](#) \*\*\*

[Ain't No Mo'](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[Ain't Too Proud](#) \*\*

[The Cradle Will Rock](#) \* 1/2

[Mrs. Murray's Menagerie](#) \*\*\* 1/2  
[Oklahoma! \(on Broadway\)](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Socrates](#) \*\*  
[The Pain Of My Belligerence](#) \*  
[Burn This](#) \*\*  
[Hadestown](#) \*\*\* 1/2  
[All My Sons](#) \* 1/2  
[Tootsie](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Ink](#) \*\*\*  
[Beetlejuice](#) \*\*  
[Estado Vegetal](#) \*\*\*  
[Hans Christian Andersen](#) \* 1/2  
[Cirque du Soleil: Luzia](#) \*\*\*  
[BLKS](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Moulin Rouge](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Bat Out Of Hell](#) \*\*  
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[Freestyle Love Supreme](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Derren Brown: Secret](#) \*\*\*  
[\(A\)loft Modulation](#) \* 1/2  
[The Great Society](#) \*\*  
[I Can't See](#) \*  
[Heroes Of The Fourth Turning](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Chasing Rainbows: The Road To Oz](#) \*\*\*  
[The Glass Menagerie \(dir Austin Pendleton & Peter Bloch\)](#) \*\*  
[Terra Firma \(debut of The Coop theater company\)](#) \*\*  
[Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation](#) \*\*\*  
[Dublin Carol](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Soft Power](#) \*\*  
[The Decline and Fall of The Entire World As Seen Through The Eyes Of Cole Porter](#) \*\*\*  
[For Colored Girls](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Scotland, PA](#) \*\*  
[The Sound Inside](#) \*\*\* (great cast, clumsy ending)

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POSTED BY MICHAEL GILTZ AT 9:00 AM



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