



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 05, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: Time For Stoppard To Stop?; A "Prom" To Forget

THE HARD PROBLEM ** out of ****

MITZI E. NEWHOUSE AT LINCOLN CENTER

Most artists have a creative peak of 10 or so years, assuming they have any peak at all. Everything before and after that all-too-brief period when they have Something To Say or at least A New Way To Say It is just more of the same. It's the necessary work leading up to that breakthrough and the downslope where they repeat themselves, as one will. Stoppard is one of the many greats that disprove this rule, since he was dependably brilliant from at least 1967 through 2002 (or *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* through *The Coast of Utopia*). For all I know, his radio play *Darkside* and the TV miniseries *Parade's End* would extend the streak another decade. I've yet to catch either.)

So it's partially protectiveness and stupidity that makes me wonder after 15 or so years of unsatisfying stage work whether Stoppard should stop. The answer -- obviously -- is no, he should not. Not writing would perhaps be like not breathing for him. I would enjoy a memoir if he's the sort that might deliver a good one (some people are too circumspect for such an effort). And I'm not ready to give up the thrill of a new play by Tom Stoppard, the way friends ask in a rush if I knew he had a new play at Lincoln Center and why hadn't they heard of this and dear god it's already sold out and can I help them buy tickets somewhere, someway, somehow?

So the hard problem is not figuring out whether the new Tom Stoppard play is good or not. It's not. The hard problem is not figuring out when it goes off the rails. The play never really coheres but it falls apart precisely at the moment where a hard-charging American of finance chews out an underling and said underling collapses to the



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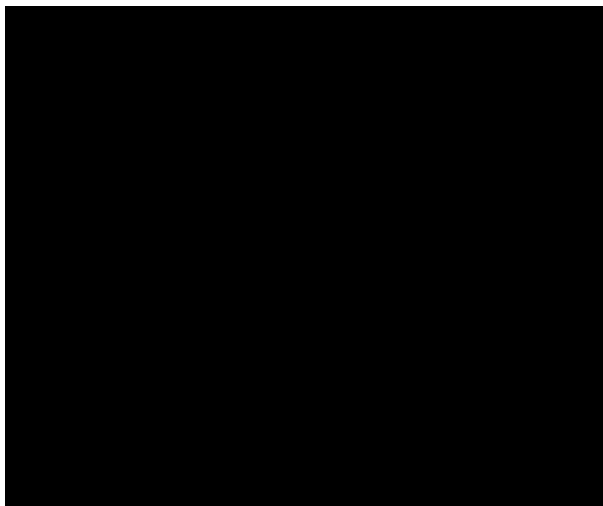
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ground in a farce-like manner and you wonder for a second if you've wandered into a different play. The hard problem is figuring out exactly *why* it doesn't work. Since Stoppard has been grappling with this play for at least three years (it was first staged in London at the National in 2015), I imagine he's been grappling with this same question.

One thing is certain: *The Hard Problem* is unquestionably Stoppardian. It involves very clever characters discussing weighty and complex ideas, batting them about like tennis balls -- playfully or more often aggressively, to score a point. Two college students are sparring with one another on their way to what we assume will be an enjoyable shag. Hilary (Adelaide Clemens) takes the side of ethics and morality while her Teaching Assistant superior Spike (Chris O'Shea) mocks the very idea of morality and sees everything -- even altruism -- as a form of self-interest. Spike is mildly insufferable, until he takes his shirt off and one objectifies him quite rudely and is willing to let the smugness slide. The only moment of true surprise in all this is when Spike is showering and Hilary kneels primly on the floor and says her prayers.



Everything here feels slightly off, from the way Hilary prays (rather sheepishly, which makes the eight year old pretense of kneeling a little hard to swallow) down to their somehow unconvincing names. Spike? Hilary? I spent the entire play trying and failing to remember their names. He's not a bad sort and does offer helpful advice. Before you know it, Hilary is interviewing at a nonprofit called the Brain Institute. Most of its work is rigorously empirical and Hilary expects to lose out to the numbers guy Amal (Eshan Bapjay). Instead Amal is shunted into the world of hedge funds and Hilary gets to tackle the hard problem of defining consciousness. It all leads to an experiment led by Hilary and her whip-smart new assistant Bo (Karoline Xu) that goes smashingly, headline making, mainstream magazine reportably well. Sort of.

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The problem is none of it convinces. One of the great marvels of Stoppard's career is how the clever-clever showing off of early plays like *Travesties* and *Jumpers* deepened into the rich, glorious humanity of his mature masterpieces *Arcadia*, *The Invention of Love* and *The Coast Of Utopia*. From start to finish, Stoppard tackled big themes. But he created a body of work where those ideas were embodied in and illustrated by characters we cared about, living and breathing people who brought those ideas to life. You don't have to give a toss about the gardening philosophy of England's past to be moved by *Arcadia* or follow the cross-currents of the Russian Revolution to root for the people in *Coast of Utopia*. Stoppard made both the ideas and the people thrillingly real and important.

Not so here. The play trots along -- deceptively enough -- nicely elevated by the performance of Clemens and O'Shea and Robert Petkoff, who makes Hilary's boss Leo interesting through sheer talent alone. You never quite buy it but it's watchable. Then it disintegrates. That bizarre pratfall of a scene where Amal faints during an atypical tirade by the institute's founder Jerry seems from another planet. Hilary at times breaks down over the memory of the daughter she had to give up in her youth, though she does so in a manner that is strange and unconvincing, to say the least. (No points for making a connection -- at least emotional -- between this long lost child and the similarly named adopted daughter of the Brain Institute's founder.) Then Spike behaves in a viciously rude manner that has no link to his earlier behavior; Spike was sometimes boorish but never mean. Toss in not one but TWO unrequited loves that we'd never know existed if it wasn't suddenly spelled out, not to mention a drawn-out ending that ties everything up too neatly and you've got a mess of a play that at least knew enough not to bother with an interval.

Jack O'Brien directs smoothly but can't make emotional sense of this hash. It is presented in the intimate Mitzi E. Newhouse as well as can be expected. If the staging comes from the play, it too is confusing. A group of observers dubbed the ensemble watches the play from the wings and gracefully moves in and out with props and the like. They and the cast very modestly interact -- smiling at or acknowledging each other and the audience in a mysterious, if friendly way -- but to what purpose I can't imagine.

For me, the play barreled past one decent ending, the moment when one character looks up to heaven and says simply, "Thank you." It was a graceful nod to the inexplicable, the ineffable, the desire to knock on wood and be grateful when things go right for a bloody change. But it didn't stop there, sad to say.

The hard problem the title refers to, the question of where and how and really IF consciousness arises is a challenging one. I imagine you can tell when a play you are writing gains consciousness, that is, becomes its own living breathing thing. Characters start saying things that surprise the playwright. Those lines are unexpected, "wrong," but

so very right. Events start to insist on happening even when careful plotting was supposed to go *that* way instead of *this*. Even a playwright as great as Stoppard might not know *how* such a thing happens. But he's seen it time and time again. And I'm willing to bet he'd admit it never really happened with *The Hard Problem*. Ah well, there's always next time.

THE PROM ** out of ****
LONGACRE THEATRE

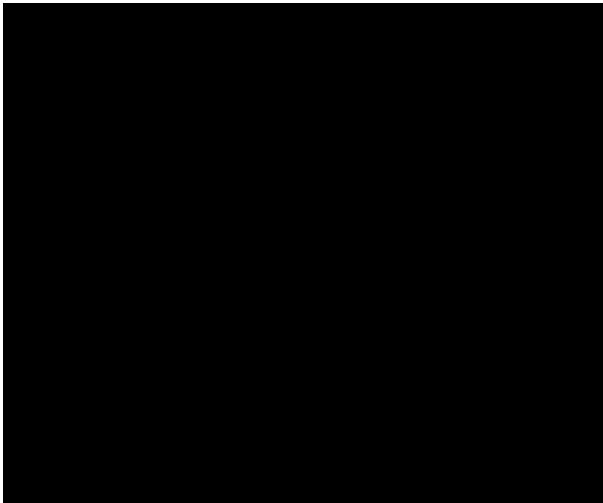
Ok, I never cared about my high school prom. You asked a date, you wore a tux, you danced, so what? Maybe it was self-defense for an (unwittingly) closeted gay kid who was too nerdy/dorky to snag the head cheerleader (or football quarterback) of cinematic dreams even if he wanted them. I was above it all, I guess, or wanted to be, though not so superior I refused to go or anything like that. I wasn't a rebel. I just didn't take it seriously or expect this was the night I'd lose my virginity or remember as a romantic highpoint of my young life. I also never thought high school (or college or middle age) was supposed to be the best time of my life. Call me Buddhist but I stay in the moment. I enjoyed high school. I enjoyed college. And I'm enjoying now.

But, you know, I get it. Prom. Prom!! I've seen enough movies to know it matters or is supposed to matter to others. So I'm perfectly willing to go along with *The Prom*, the benign new musical about a teen girl in the heartland who just wants to take her girlfriend to the prom. (In London, the musical *Everybody's Talking About Jamie!* is about a boy who just wants to wear a dress to prom.) Actually, it's not really about that lonely lesbian standing up for herself.

It's *really* about some self-centered Broadway stars trying to recover from their flop new musical about Eleanor Roosevelt. It gets such poisonous reviews they know they must do something to rehabilitate their images. Sure, "self-centered" and "Broadway star" is redundant but Dee Dee Allen (Beth Leavel) and Barry Glickman (Brooks Ashmanskas) are really self-centered, even by the standards of the Great White Way. They need a cause, something to prove they care, damnit! Then they can get some good publicity and move on to their next shown with a nice little boost in their Q ratings. Lo and behold, they stumble across the story of a poor little teen in nowheresville who can't bring her girlfriend to the prom. Before you know it, they and their friends (and the cast of a non-Equity production of *Godspell*) have descended on that small town to raise some holy hell.

You can plot out the rest. The stars get a little humbled and realize to boot that the hicks in hicksville aren't such hicks after all. Said hicks learn not all sodomites are sad and big city folk aren't so bad once you get to know them. Everyone sings a little, dances a little, lessons are learned and if you don't know whether that lovelorn teen Emma (Caitlin Kinnunen) gets to go to prom with her gal, well then you've

never seen a Broadway musical comedy OR the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade!



What's surprising is how often *The Prom* fails to match even those modest standards. The book is by Bob Martin and Chad Beguelin, the lyrics by Beguelin and the music by Matthew Sklar. And between them in various configurations they've been involved with shows like *The Drowsy Chaperone* (Martin's triumph), *The Wedding Singer*, *Elf* and *Aladdin* (a terrific show and a triumph for Beguelin). Toss in Casey Nicholaw of *The Book of Mormon* (and *Mean Girls* and *Something Rotten* and the new London *Dreamgirls*) and you've got a lot of talent that should know better.

Among the many problems? The big city know-it-alls never really learn a lesson. Not one. In act one Dee Dee Allen does deign to go to Applebee's with school principal Mr. Hawkins. But he's played by the charming Michael Potts and the principal is a super fan who can recount her every role. His idea of romance is telling Dee Dee how important her work is to regular folk ("We Look To You"). Any celeb might be willing to spend an hour to hear that, especially when it's so

sincere. In act two, the celebs learn that when you fail at something you never really cared about, you can always buy some goodwill by breaking out the credit card.

Barry Glickman tries to be besties with Emma, the teen who really didn't want her life turned into a Cause, thank you very much. How does he do this? Well, when the prom seems to be happening, he asks Emma what she's going to wear and then scoffs at her desire for a tux and some high tops. Nope, he insists she glam and fem it up. Really? Really! In this post-Ellen, #MeToo world he simply ignores what Emma really wants and insists she conform to his cisgender, straight, John Hughes idea of what a girl SHOULD wear to the prom (as any self-respecting Broadway queer at a rally might loudly protest). You might well expect this is a set-up for Barry to learn a lesson! But no...she just goes along with it and wears what he wants and looks nice, as far as he's concerned. It's almost bizarre how tone deaf the show is on this key issue. And if you think it's a minor matter...well, IT'S PROM and what you wear matters! They even do a whole number about it, for Pete's sake. And if you don't care what you wear, well that should be respected too.

It gets worse. In act two, fellow actor Trent Oliver (a deadpan Christopher Sieber) points out that the PTA and the Broadway stars and the media are all arguing about the prom...but no one is talking to the kids! So he goes to talk to the kids. Of course, all he really does is put on a backwards baseball cap, hang out at the 7-Eleven and when the kids finally recognize him (he was in a hit sitcom way back when), well, HE does all the talking. And that's one of the good numbers!

The kids are clueless Christians who are supposed to be dumbfounded by the idea that passages of the Bible forbid tattoos and divorce and the like. (In the real world, Trent, they'd be quoting Scripture and dismantling his banal take on Scripture faster than you can say "Vacation Bible School!" Oh they'd be wrong when they say it's love to tell a lesbian she needs to change her ways, but they'd hardly be surprised by what he preaches.) In other words, small town folk aren't so isolated and clueless as the show thinks and lots of Broadway stars come from small towns and love small towns, even if they don't love its politics. You don't really expect a light Broadway musical comedy to be wildly nuanced but the stereotypes of 60 years ago don't work today. A show can be silly but it still needs to be smart. And surely one of the dozens of producers should have noticed that the thankless role of the agent/publicist played by Josh Lamon had about ten lines, none of them necessary and could be easily cut.

What does work is the talent on display, doing their best with very modest material. Act one is thoroughly forgettable, but act two starts out strong. It begins with "Zazz," a song where actress Angie (Angie Schworer -- and I could have sworn she is a kid sister to Jane Krakowski) shares a little showbiz stiff upper lip advice to Emma. It at least feels rooted in the real world, with a Broadway hooper offering up

what she knows best: jazz hands. That's followed by "The Lady's Improving," in which Dee Dee apologizes to the principal by reenacting the breakthrough number from her first big show. It has the benefit of ignoring the musical at hand and offering up a parody/tribute to showstoppers of the past, a la *The Drowsy Chaperone*. And even Trent's "Love Thy Neighbor" perks things up. That's three in a row of not-bad stuff, but that's about it.

Still, Leavel and Potts as the Broadway diva and the principal bring some actual humanity to their scenes together. Ashmanskas is too cheerful to dismiss entirely even in these flimsy surroundings, while Sieber has the best line of the night, thanks to his dry delivery. They all have moments, including Kinnunen as the teen Emma. It's easy to forget about her, just like the celebs do. But she is pretty winning, with an easy, open presence that makes you care for her even when the show can't be bothered.

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Frozen **

Rocktopia *

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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 ***

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The Prom **

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