



WEDNESDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

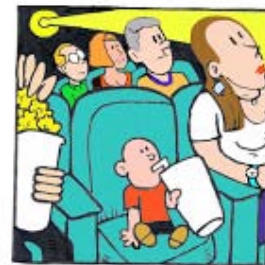
## THEATER: "The Prisoner" Can't Get Free

**THE PRISONER** \*\* out of \*\*\*\***THEATRE FOR A NEW AUDIENCE AT POLONSKY SHAKESPEARE CENTER**

Legendary director Peter Brook returns with this fable-like story about a young man punished for an unspeakable crime. The story is presented on a mostly bare stage with a minimum of props. The cast includes some actors for whom English is a second language (which makes them one up on me) and so they speak slowly and stiffly. *The Prisoner* is quiet, elusive and ultimately as tad confounding and one is made to feel a rube for thinking so -- no wonder they applaud us at the end, as if to gently pat us on the head for grappling with their art. It is admirable, of course; how could something involving Peter Brook and his longtime collaborator Marie-Hélène Estienne not be admirable? But it is far from satisfying.

The narrative is so slim I will begin where Brook begins: with his note in the Playbill explaining the show's genesis. He traveled to Afghanistan and saw a man sentenced to an odd fate: he must sit outside a prison and face it, only leaving when he felt justified in doing so. Recognizing prison as a dehumanizing force, the idea was that this man might atone for his crimes, "repair" himself and go on to a productive life, rather than just being punished. Brook was intrigued by this image, it stayed with him and many years later he created this play, co-writing and co-directing it with Estienne.

So we see a young man in the aftermath of a terrible deed. His uncle sees the brutal life in prison and convinces a judge to change the sentence to the one described above. And so the young sits on a hill near some woods, facing a prison. Years pass as he is accosted by or simply encounters locals, an executioner, guards, a fellow prisoner and travelers. As one might expect for such an internal struggle, *The*



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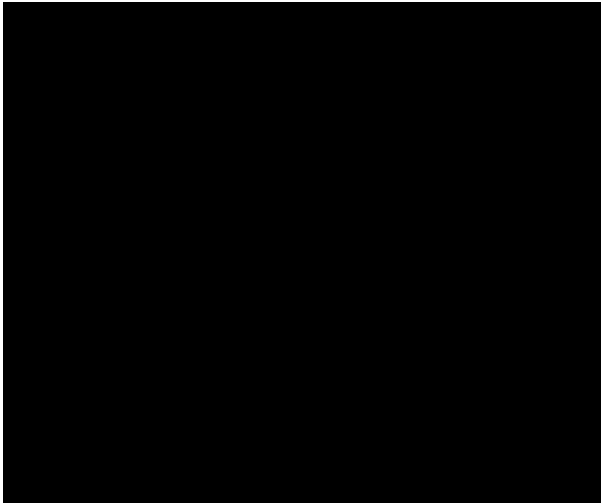
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*Prisoner* is meditative, modest and demands your full attention for its 85 minute running time. That attention is not squandered but neither is it rewarded.



In real life, Brook never found out what the "unspeakable crime" committed by the prisoner actually was. For the play, they invented one and more's the pity. An unspeakable crime has a lovely, fable-like ambiguity to it. Instead of a terrible crime, the play plainly states that the young man's father had recently been widowed. When the boy came home, he found his father in bed with the boy's sister -- in a rage, the son killed his dad. Patricide, even over a dreadful crime like that, is a tremendous taboo throughout history. But the incestuous act becomes a tremendous roadblock for the rest of the play.

First it explains what the young man did. Then he confesses his real fear: that it was a crime of jealousy, not rage and that he too wants an incestuous relationship with his sister. Then his sister tells him to stop all this self-flagellating nonsense and come home and be a father to the child she has born from sleeping with their dad. (It's unclear to me but she seems to be offering herself as his lover in the bargain.) When he turns her down, she drops off the kid with their uncle and heads to America to become a doctor. And the uncle tells the prisoner that yes, many cultures look down on incest but when he saw the father sleeping with the daughter, the uncle saw only love.

What the hell? Brook is not making any argument about Afghanistan's culture -- indeed, the show itself is explicitly universal and located nowhere in particular. Why in heaven's name he decided to introduce incest and then make everyone BUT the prisoner seem fine with it -- and to no particular purpose -- escapes me. You're so confused by the slow drip of details (it takes half the play or longer for all this information to get out) that it keeps you from understanding the motives of everyone involved...except the prisoner, who is the only one being punished. I'd be perfectly happy -- if dubious -- to watch a drama where characters argue cheerfully for incest. But *The Prisoner* doesn't so much argue for it as simply mention it in passing and then

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furrow its brow over your parochial complaints.

All of this is offered in a scrupulously poetical setting. Very little of it has dramatic heft, though Hiran Abeysekera as the prisoner and Hayley Carmichael as the wide-eyed traveler (and other roles) keep our attention when center stage. Nonetheless, running times matter and when a play is said to run 70 minutes but actually runs 85 minutes, that's telling. Running 20% long is a sure sign of actors indulging themselves or more likely here struggling to find something to play. It would be churlish to say one was a prisoner at this drama -- I'd rather see a failed work by real artists over a failed work of commercial pap any day of the week and Brook is indeed legendary. But whatever insight into human nature and crime and punishment this show strives for remains a mystery.

## THEATER OF 2018

Homelife/The Zoo Story (at Signature) \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

Escape To Margaritaville \*\*

Broadway By The Year: 1947 and 1966 \*\*\*

Lobby Hero \*\*\*

Frozen \*\*

Rocktopia \*

Angels in America \*\* 1/2

Mean Girls \*\* 1/2

The Sting \*\*

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 \*\*\*

What The Constitution Means To Me \*\*

The Winning Side \*

Oklahoma \*\*

Mother Of The Maid \*

Love's Labour's Lost \*\* 1/2

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POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 6:01 PM 

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