



SUNDAY, OCTOBER 28, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

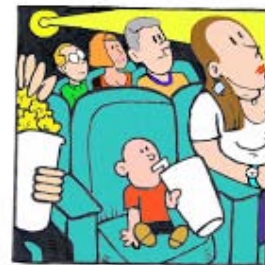
THEATER: "Thunderbodies!" and the Glorious Mess of "The Ferryman"

THUNDERBODIES *** out of ******THE FERRYMAN** *** 1/2 out of ******THUNDERBODIES** *** out of ******SOHO REP**

At the beginning of *Thunderbodies* (which, honestly, should be styled *THUNDERBODIES!*) a string of letters spelling out *Thunderbodies* is bannered across the stage, much as you'd spell out Happy Birthday for a friend. Music starts playing, the banner starts bouncing up and down and then more ferociously and then it pauses only to start wiggling side to side. Either you start smiling or you're in for a long 90 minutes.

I started smiling, as *Thunderbodies* is the latest in a string of plays that seem right up Soho Rep's alley. Do they put out a request for plays that are formally playful, silly, avant garde, daring, extravagantly on the edge and yet just plain fun? I think so and with this piece by Kate Tarker directed by Lileana Blain-Cruz, they've presented another one. It's utter nonsense, rat-a-tat goofy, impeccably directed and mounted and performed with gusto by a very game cast. *Thunderbodies* has just enough of an emotional core to make you feel something might be at stake, if not quite enough to make you genuinely care.

If you're in a game mood, this is a promising work and an excellent showcase for one and all, especially Deirdre O'Connell as Grotilde. She knew her performance needed to go big and then wisely decided twice as big would be a nice place to start before really taking off.



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To describe *Thunderbodies* is to kill it, but here goes. The war has ended and desk jockey General Itterod (Juan Carlos Hernández) proposes to his true love, the dismissive and frightening Grotilde. How can she marry without her son safe at home? But her son (Matthew Jeffers) has refused a direct appeal from the President (Ben Horner) and refuses to come home from the war. Itterod heads reluctantly into enemy territory, hoping he can bring the lad back before fate (or the lovely refugee played by Monique St. Cyr) interferes.

And that tells you precisely nothing. There is dancing and singing (about thunder bellies and thunder butts and thunder unmentionables) and a candy colored multi-level set (courtesy Matt Saunders) that feels like a baby's playpen crossed with the desolate landscape of Beckett (with a recliner in the corner). The President speaks to his soldier via drone -- and the tiny little drone is manipulated by the actor playing the President which is somehow far more amusing than it should be. The General and his lady love plan to get divorced *first* so they can end in wedded bliss rather than the usual way around. And on and on it goes.

It's unfair to single out the set because every tech element is on spot. Director Blain-Cruz keeps the pace moving so that when the story momentarily flags, you barely notice. Jeffers and St. Cyr create a sweet yearning for peace that is the closest the play gets to an emotional core. But that other couple (the general and Grotilde) have their moments too and Horner consistently amuses as the President. They all manage the difficult task of being silly rather than acting silly.

But none better than O'Connell. Growling out her lines in a barking command, dominating the stage with a loose-lipped sneer, straddling that recliner like Cleopatra, O'Connell lasers in on the endless self-regard of her part and makes it hilariously real. In her hands, the least likable, most over-the-top grotesque of *Thunderbodies* is the most believable and lovable of all. She and the rest of the cast make this nonsense -- which pulls off a moment of genuine pathos thanks to an "Oh shit!" fade out -- worth catching.

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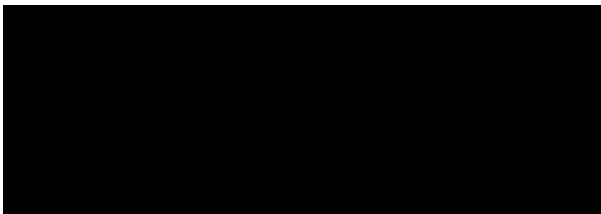
THE FERRYMAN * 1/2 out of ******
BERNARD B. JACOBS THEATRE

What a glorious, well-acted ballsy mess of a play. That's no surprise coming from Jez Butterworth, a very hit or miss writer who broke out with *Mojo* in 1995 and then wandered far afield until 14 years later he scored a home run with *Jerusalem*. As with all his plays, I found *Jerusalem* scattered and unstructured (in a bad way). But he's always had a gift for dialogue and creating vivid characters and few loom as large as Johnny "Rooster" Byron, especially (or perhaps only?) when embodied by Mark Rylance.

I wouldn't have missed Rylance but his Falstaffian turn papered over a lot of problems. The play was admired in New York yet seemed to strike a profound chord in the UK. Sadly, Butterworth followed that triumph with his Emperor-has-no-clothes drama *The River*. Like a yoyo, Butterworth has rebounded again, this time with the most satisfying piece by him I've seen yet. It has the virtues and flaws Butterworth usually has -- reams of terrific dialogue and memorable characters, but no real idea what to do with them.

Here, however, he boldly tackles that quintessential drama, the Irish play about the Troubles. Drawing deeply on Sean O'Casey and the like, Butterworth doubles down on every cliché imaginable, not to mention every tried and true plot point. Large family? Check. (The children keep coming and coming in the opening scene, pouring out of cabinets and doorways and tramping downstairs until you can't help thinking it's a Monty Python skit taking the piss.) Drinking to excess? Check and check (and check again). A traitor. A mad old loon who bursts into song and truth tells. A boastful fool. A doomed romance. A righteous (or mad) obsession with vengeance against the British. Country vs city. The violent vs. the pacific. And stories? As many stories as there are children. And that's saying something.

Butterworth was born in London but this is a defiantly Irish work and he dares you to call him on it. How can you, when he's underlined and whooped and celebrated every trope possible before you've even figured out who is who in the cast? As a bonus, paying homage to O'Casey and the like has given him the bones of a well-structured play and that's what allows *The Ferryman* to be his best yet. I was with him every step of the way (misgivings and all) until the inevitably sour and doomed finale. I expected no less but still somehow it didn't add up. That's a small price to pay for some of the best acting on stage this season.





You don't know the plot but you know its type. It's 1981 and the hunger strike embodied by the late Bobby Sands is in full force. For the first time in ages, the sympathies with the world are aligned with the Irish Republican Army and they want to keep it that way. Unfortunately, a body has been found of an Irish traitor who was summarily executed and dumped in a bog. Now that it's been recovered, tongues may start wagging and reporters may start probing. A priest is quickly dispatched to make sure Quinn Carney (Paddy Considine) keeps mum over the death of his brother. The IRA had absolutely nothing to do with it and they want to make sure Quinn understands that and his brother's wife (now widow) understands that and all two dozen or so of their children understand that. Shut your mouth and we can all remain friends and the focus will remain on the hunger strikers and not revert to the bloody violence the IRA doles out to those that cross them.

About a hundred other stories and plots and subplots are also involved in this corker of a play divided into three parts and lasting some 200 minutes. (Only an act of God presumably talked Butterworth out of five acts.) Quinn is actually in love with his brother's wife Caitlyn (Laura Donnelly), which may be why Quinn's actual wife (Genevieve O'Reilly) has slowly retreated to her bedroom with a host of "ailments." Aunt Patricia (a wonderfully waspish Dearbhla Molloy) practically spits every time she hears of Margaret Thatcher, in part because her beloved brother died during the Easter Uprising. Aunt Maggie Far Away (Fionnula Flanagan) stays in a chair nodding off in her own dreamland until suddenly she comes out of her daze and answers any questions put to her by the wee ones, as if she's the oracle at Delphi. She can tell you how many children you'll have, why Aunt Pat is so bitter, and regale you with her own lost love all before fading back into the mists. Tom Kettle (Justin Edwards) is a hulking British man who's a bit slow and somehow washed up on the Carney farm, quietly tending to the animals, producing apples out of his pocket and nursing a soft spot for the lovely Caitlyn. Have you got time? I could introduce a dozen other tales if you've the time.

Full credit to director Sam Mendes and his creative team, especially the set by Rob Howell, dominated by the kitchen of the Carney farmhouse, a warm and expansive space with a sloping roof that you can imagine funneling all these characters down towards the back wall in a big jumble. (Life is complicated and all their stories are

intertwined.) When a reference is made to the Corcoran lads coming over to help with the harvest, I thought well surely THEY at least will remain offstage. But damned if more actors don't get thrown into the mix as well.

Nonetheless, Mendes juggles them all with ease. Any time a quiet moment is needed, somehow everyone vanishes this way and that in the most natural manner possible. (The backstage of this play must be the most crowded space on Broadway, if not all of New York.) It's like a magic trick and then Mendes does it in reverse and the room fills up again in a flash. Full credit to Butterworth's genuine gifts since there are so many characters and yet I feel like I know them well. I may not remember all their names at first blush, but when I see them I know them completely.

Nonetheless, the play's bold embrace of cliches sinks it at the very end. The gentle and sweet Tom Kettle is a nod to Lenny in *Of Mice and Men* but the play fails to make clear how much of a nod until far too late. Other last minute actions simply feel unnecessary. We know without doubt things will not end well; actually showing us how badly things will end somehow belabors the point. And yet, it's a funny piercing boisterous ride right up to the crash.

Truly, everyone is solid, right down to the little kids who might have cracked a smile once or twice (they're having a grand time) but are still specific and unique. Let them all take a bow but Paddy Considine in particular makes a marvelous stage debut. Donnelly has quite the gift from her husband Butterworth in a role that let's her shine. And Tom Glynn-Carney (who played the almost angelic son of Mark Rylance in *Dunkirk*) is wonderfully physical as the dickish, hard-drinking and boastful Shane Corcoran. (You know as soon as he's strutting about that Shane will be a trouble maker and his own worst enemy.)

For all my problems with the play, too many scenes are too good for me to do anything but wish I could see it again. The spell Aunt Maggie Far Away casts when she tells her tales, the late night drinking of the Corcoran and Carney lads (with Shane put in his place in a deflating manner), the gentle and unwished for proposal from Tom Kettle, the way Mary Carney finally shows some spine and lays down the law with her husband Quinn and on and on. When the Ferryman comes for Butterworth, the playwright will surely be able to delay the inevitable by simply saying, "Let me tell you a story...."

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
[The Lifespan of a Fact](#) **
[India Pale Ale](#) *
Thunderbodies ***
The Ferryman *** 1/2

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