



WEDNESDAY, MAY 02, 2018

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "TRAVESTIES" IS NOT

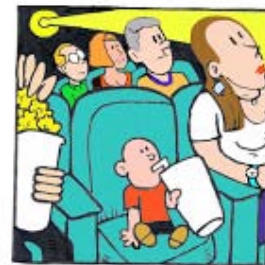
TRAVESTIES *** 1/2 out of ****

ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY AT AMERICAN AIRLINES

Is Tom Stoppard a show-off? His plays are brainy and oh-so-clever and you feel you need to brush up on the topic at hand before the curtain rises or you'll be at sea. Indeed, the program handed out at his masterpiece *Arcadia* usually includes a helpful summary on the history of British gardens and the philosophical underpinnings of same. Some artists wear their hearts on their sleeve, but Stoppard brandishes his *brains*, they say!

Stuff and nonsense, I say. Go to the Roundabout's delightful, fizzy revival of *Travesties*, as you should. I promise, anyone with even a passing understanding of dialectical materialism, pre-Surrealistic art movements and amateur theatricals in Zurich during the war to end all wars will gobble it up.

Now you got that (modest) joke because it's crafted to allow you to enjoy it even if you don't know the topics at hand. Stoppard -- perhaps our greatest living playwright -- is quite a bit better than that. *Travesties* does indeed involve author James Joyce, Dadaist Tristan Tzara and the revolutionary Lenin along with the many ideas exploding in Europe during World War I. What of it? James Joyce is a towering figure in literature and *Ulysses* -- the book he is working on while trapped in Zurich -- is a modernist landmark. Does an awareness of *Ulysses* or *Moby-dick* now count as hopelessly sophisticated? Lenin for Pete's sake led a revolution that established a totalitarian state in Russia which dominated global politics for a century. Dada-ism is as close to obscure the show gets and even there the mere word Dada practically explains itself. Even *60 Minutes* knows modern art can poke fun at the very idea of art, even if *60 Minutes* never quite



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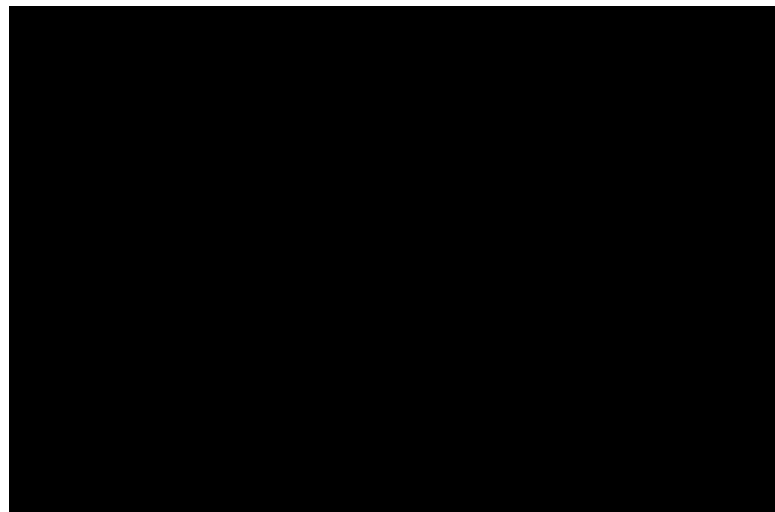
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understood it wasn't in on the joke.

Beware of plays that pat you on the back and make you feel a little smarter or smugger for having attended them, the Yasmina Reza boulevard comedies of the world with their knowing middle class archness. They're the theatrical equivalent of James Michener novels or Tom Clancy thrillers, books you can consume and walk away from clutching a few stray details about the conquest of Alaska or nuclear submarines and consider them enlightening.

Go to *Travesties* knowing nothing about nothing (the way those of us not up on England's dynasties might have first approached a Shakespearean history play) and you'll have great fun. You'll see an old man grapple with his memory, proud intellectuals brought down a notch by their hubris, a strip tease, a romantic comedy of errors in which a passage from *Ulysses* is unintentionally switched with a diatribe from Lenin that causes quite a bit of confusion, a little song and dance, a lot of limericks, not nearly enough nudity and while you might not always know *precisely* what is going on you'll be mightily tickled. The true genius of Stoppard is that the play works for everyone but the more you know about any of the historical figures or the movements they inspired in writing and art and politics, the more dazzled you will be. Oh and it all riffs on the classic comedy *The Importance of Being Earnest* to side-splitting effect and if you don't know what *that* is, well bugger off.



How good is this revival? Stoppard is one of my favorite playwrights and I've waited more than 40 years to see this Tony winning comedy and it met my expectations. To be honest, I read the play just before seeing it and as with Shakespeare, I recommend that for newcomers. Knowing the broad outlines of the story and the dialogue and the various references will allow you to relax and enjoy the shenanigans overseen by director Patrick Marber and his excellent cast.

The marvelous Tom Hollander stars as Henry Carr, who in real life did indeed star in an amateur theatrical production of *The Importance Of*

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THEATER: TENNESSEE
WILLIAMS ON SIMMER
WITH "SUMMER...

THEATER: "TRAVESTIES" IS
NOT

THEATER: "SAINT JOAN"
LACKS FIRE

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Being Earnest in Zurich during the war, an event overseen by James Joyce of all people. They had a spat after the play's apparent success and Carr's triumph in the lead role (not Earnest, the other one). Carr sued Joyce, Joyce sued Carr and mostly won and then to rub salt in the wounds mocked Carr by making him a minor character in *Ulysses*, namely a drunken and obscene soldier. Of course Carr got the last laugh since Joyce's revenge made Carr immortal. And now Stoppard has done it again, making Carr the lead of another great work of art and in the process doubling down on the cleverness of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*. Instead of making use of one masterpiece (*Hamlet*), here Stoppard makes hay of *Ulysses*, *Earnest*, Dadaism and some of Lenin's choicer phrases to boot.

The richly atmospheric set by Tim Hatley is a shambling, book-stuffed library/home with a rostrum or pulpit of sorts that allows various characters to intone with high drama when necessary, when they're not popping out of it to make a dramatic entrance. Out shambles Hollander, who merely stoops over to indicate the elderly Carr, a man aggrandizing his brush with fame whenever he can recall what he's talking about. Revolution is thick in the air in Zurich but much of the action takes place at the library, where Joyce dictates his masterpiece and Lenin refines his economic and political theories.

Tristan has already launched the nonsense revolution of Dadaism but he counts as a relatively minor character in the presence of those two giants. Carr loves the librarian who is helping Lenin. Tristan loves Carr's sister, who is helping Joyce. And they all butt heads as romantic and financial entanglements multiply. It's possible Carr might have prevented the Russian Revolution if he'd followed orders instead of following his heart. Or perhaps he has the dates all wrong.

Did I mention the limericks? Some scenes are written entirely in limericks; others turn dialogue into song and still others call for full-on chaos worthy of a musical. The director Marber has the entire cast focused on the hugely essential stakes because nothing is funnier than people who are deeply committed to a cause -- Tristan may swim across the floor, brandishing his hands like gills and zooming in on Carr while shouting out "Dada dada dada!" and it may be very, very funny but it's certainly not funny to him.

The entire creative team and cast is working at their peak here. Hatley also did the costumes and they're great, but everything is essential for this clockwork mechanism of a play to run smoothly, from the lighting of Neil Austin to the terrific sound design and original music of Adam Cork, which does the work of ten.

I didn't even recognize Dan Butler of *Frasier* for a while, who plays Lenin and he's fiercely funny here. Opal Alladin has very little to do as his wife but Scarlett Strallen as Gwendolen (the sister of Carr) and Sara Topham as Cecily the librarian have bigger parts and score nicely, especially in their duel over tea. Peter McDonald is good as Joyce but

Patrick Kerr has the droll butler with revolutionary tendencies named Bennett to dig into and if I were McDonald I'd be a little jealous.

Yet the triumphs of the evening belong to Hollander and his co-star Seth Numrich. Hollander is one of those actors about which theatergoers automatically say "Oh, he's always good" for the very understandable reason that he's always good. But he's never been better than here in a role that demands razor wit and charm and bluster and fragility and strength. It's not a revelation because, you know, he's always good. Hollander deservedly earned a Tony nomination and if I were voting, he'd win (as would this revival).

And when you go to see *Travesties* you'll discover that the real travesty is that Seth Numrich was not nominated as well, for Best Supporting Actor. The star of *War Horse* on Broadway, Numrich has appeared in all sorts of theater and TV and film but never to such dazzling effect. Oh it's a pinwheel of a performance but that's exactly what this farcical play demands. Whether backing onto the stage with a slightly confused look on his face, speaking with an outrageous Hungarian accent (or is it Bulgarian?), cawing out "dada dada dada" like a bird, effortlessly switching from positively indignant to "hale fellow well met" in the blink of an eye or diving into song and dance, he is an ideal partner for Hollander, returning every shot with elan.

How easy it is to take Hollander for granted. How easy not to realize Numrich could do so much more than he's been asked up to now. And how easy to take for granted Roundabout. It's been more than 40 years since anyone revived the Tony winning play, despite a name brand author like Stoppard to sell it and yet who else would bother? And *Travesties* is hardly proving a commercial slam dunk even with the rave reviews it has earned. So thank goodness they did it right and how lucky for theatergoers: you can still get great tickets to the smartest, silliest show in town.

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