



Theater: "Oslo" Thrills, "Little Foxes" Bores



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OSLO \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

THE LITTLE FOXES \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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LINCOLN CENTER THEATRE AT VIVIAN BEAUMONT

*Oslo*, the new play by J.T. Rogers, is not about the Israeli-Palestinian accord reached during secret negotiations in Oslo in 1992-1993. Well, ok, technically it *is* about the Israeli-Palestinian accord reached during secret negotiations in Oslo in 1992-1993. That's the driving element of the plot and it's not mere backdrop. The details of what is being negotiated, the back and forth, the life and death stakes on a personal and political level are all deeply important and presented with clarity, humor and admirable balance.

(Balance being an especially devilish ideal. I kept a mental tally in my head — hmm, the Israelis seem a little buffoonish here or hmm, the Palestinians appear a little demagogic there — and I don't have a rooting interest other than peace, so I can't imagine the difficulty in presenting both sides in a fair way that is also balanced and complex and dramatically interesting and true to life. Oy.)

But any play rooted in real life events that hopes to endure can't just faithfully present history; it must transcend that and be rooted above all in characters that come to life. And that's where Rogers play is so wonderfully successful. It's funny and moving and bursting with vivid characters. I may actually have a firmer grasp of the issues at hand in the Oslo Agreement. But what truly matters is that about eight or ten characters came alive for me and their story mattered.

That story is indeed the talks that led to the historic Oslo Agreement, which included direct negotiations between the state of Israel and the P.L.O., a recognition by the P.L.O. of Israel's right to exist and other landmark elements. It is a fascinating tale if not necessarily a happy one — the ending involves a recap of what has happened since that moment of agreement bursting with the possibility of peace and most of what has happened has proven a disappointment. But the drama of enemies coming face to face and slowly seeing each other as humans will be enduring.

The presentation by director Bartlett Sher and his creative team seems simplicity itself. Up pops Jefferson Mays as Terje, a social scientist and husband of Jennifer Ehle's Mona, an official in Norway's Foreign Ministry. Terje is clutching a phone and looks out curiously at the audience in a passive but alert manner. On stage a table appears out of the floor, Mona walks in and phones ring and we're off. Mona's boss is aghast to learn that she and Terje are in the midst of talks between Israel and the P.L.O. even as official talks are taking place in Washington D.C. between Israel and third parties (since they can't legally meet with the P.L.O.). Dear god, why is Terje playing at diplomat? This could scuttle the real talks taking place, set off a war, endanger the lives of the Israelis and Palestinians foolish enough to be taking part, make Norway the laughingstock of the diplomatic world and piss off the United States in the bargain.

Slowly more and more characters are introduced and we learn how it all began. Terje and Mona were in the West Bank and deeply moved by seeing a young Israeli soldier and Palestinian youth facing off against each other, both simultaneously filled with hate and wishing to be anywhere doing anything other than what they were doing. He launched a study of living conditions in the West Bank and together Terje and Mona considered the possibility of doing...something.

Terje had become enamored of a style of negotiations done in an entirely different fashion than the ones sponsored by the US. Those took place under the spotlight of the world, with intermediaries overseeing every detail and so on and so forth. Terje's approach involved zero publicity, secret talks, and no intermediaries. The adversaries sat in a room with no agenda, no intermediaries and sat face to face. They might storm out, they

might yell, they might get frustrated. But they talked. And every day, outside the negotiating room, they must eat every meal together, drink together, socialize together, talk together and somehow perhaps begin to see the humanity in one another, see each other as individuals.

And that's it. First come two Israeli intellectuals with no official mandate from the government. They sit in a room and talk and yell and bicker (and eat and drink) with two men from the P.L.O. Terje and Mona do nothing other than see to their needs and travel arrangements and cover stories to explain why they keep returning to Norway. They are a conduit for phone messages when talks are suspended. They are the center of attention and the butt of jokes (Terje more than Mona, who is treated with a little patronizing civility by the men).

The resulting drama is very funny, suspenseful, dramatic and quite moving. I liked Daniel Oreskes' droopy-faced performance as one of the Israeli intellectuals even more when I saw how it contrasted with his turn as Shimon Perez. Anthony Azizi was compelling as the PLO's Abu Ala. And Michael Aronov took over the room as the intimidating Israeli official Uri Savir...who then transformed into a cursing, hilariously over the top fellow the moment he was away from the Palestinians.

This is a strong, solid play given a superlative production of the sort perhaps only Lincoln Center could muster here in the US. The entire cast of 18 or so deserve superlatives (along with the waffles served up daily by the cook that alone seemed to ensure good will on all sides). Ehle and Mays in particular were exceptional. Just as Mona and Terje subsumed their needs to the importance of negotiations, Ehle and Mays are completely in service to the play, both compelling and alive but never drawing undue attention to themselves, which is no easy feat when you're talking about two such terrific actors. Mays in particular has an Alec Guinness-like ability to disappear into a part and seem utterly insignificant and yet specific and real.

A recurring theme as history overtook the players and people who once seemed so essential to the process were shunted aside is "It's not about you." Except in *Oslo* it is very much about each and every one of them, wonderfully so.

THE LITTLE FOXES \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT THE SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE

I'm not sure what to think of writer Lillian Hellman. Her plays don't seem to have stood the test of time since they're almost never successfully revived. Certainly, her lifetime of feuds and blacklists and political activism seems a lot more interesting than most of her dramas. Only *The Little Foxes* gets propped up now and again, mostly because it has two juicy female roles, though the star always grabs at the malevolent Regina. Tallulah Bankhead, Stockard Channing, Anne Bancroft and now in a two-fer Laura Linney and Cynthia Nixon have tackled it. Elizabeth Taylor had the most success with a revival in a 1981 production that ran a little over four months. But then, you know, Elizabeth Taylor!

Now after years of merely reading about them (I won't count the film versions), I finally get a chance to see

one of her shows put on by the Manhattan Theatre Club. It isn't disappointing, exactly, since I expected a soapy melodrama but held out for more. Yet melodrama it is, of the most timid sort. One can see the same sort of machinations every week on *Empire*.

The hook here is that two-fer we're getting. Linney and Nixon are switching off in the roles of the scheming Regina (played memorably in the film version by Bette Davis) and the mousy Birdie. Due to a star's cold, I was only able to catch the casting of Linney as Regina and Nixon as Birdie, the version submitted for Tony consideration. (Getting Tony voters into see both performances in both roles would be financially crippling for a limited run like this.) It is to be fair the more likely bit of casting; Linney sounded in full control of her voice (after a cold that sidelined her for a day) and both made the most of the thin material at hand. This sort of switching off of roles is great fun (a la the famed revival of Sam Shepard's *True West*) but it would be even more fun in a better show actually worth seeing twice. Still, I don't think fans will feel cheated no matter which version they catch, except by Hellman.

It's spring of 1900 and a new century and new era has most definitely been born. The Confederacy is dead but the aristocracy propped up by the slave labor of other humans is still living off its faded delusions. In their stead are tacky merchants, people who earn money with the sweat of their brow — or more typically, the sweat of other people's brows. The Hubbards are of this new breed and quite appropriately they have a terrific new business scheme in the works. In Hellman's rather telling detail, a new factory might be situated in the heart of the south because that region never met a union they liked ("Strike? What's a strike?") and labor is plentiful, cheap and docile. Some things never change.

Ben Hubbard (a nicely oily Michael McKean) has all his ducks in a row except for one detail. He'd like to keep it all in the family but his sister Regina's husband is off recovering from an illness and refuses to answer their entreaties to sign off on a deal that will make them all filthy rich. Regina (Linney) is at least the equal of her brother in terms of business and society. She dispatches her timid daughter to retrieve said husband (heart trouble be damned!) with the implication that Regina has softened towards him. It's all a scam to get their hands on the money that's desperately needed, something that the Hubbards have proven willing to do pretty much anything to get. Case in point: their brother married the dull and worthy Birdie (Nixon) just to get her land and holdings.

It all comes to a head when hubby Richard Thomas returns and promises to do everything in his power to stop the deal. Stocks are stolen, words are heatedly exchanged (tiresomely, sometimes offstage but loud enough for us to eavesdrop in on) and matters do come to quite a boil.

The cast digs in because what else can one do with melodrama? The play has one delicious scene where Regina sits back and crosses her legs, a moment of implied evil that grabs the audience's attention presumably without fail. *The Little Foxes* is a three act play with all the stodginess that implies and yet it's played...well, not quite *broadly* but with vigor. The curtain comes crashing down after the fury of Act Two as Regina curses her tiresomely ethical husband, as if the house manager must shield the audience from the passion flying about. if only.

The politics are the remaining curiosity here. Hellman's sympathies lie with the landed aristocracy of the faded Confederacy — they're seen as kind to their slaves (I mean, servants) and filled with noblesse oblige. Meanwhile, the capitalists who exploit labor are of course the villains. It's a pity Hellman didn't realize that everyone on stage is a villain, except the servants. Those two stock parts are played by actors (Caroline Stefanie Clay and Charles Turner) who must struggle — as presumably they so often have in the past — to bring some interest and humanity to characters sorely lacking in anything other than stereotypes and a dash of down-home sass. For a fellow traveler, it's ironic that the only people in the show Hellman *isn't* interested in are the workers.

## Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) \*\*

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) \*\*

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) \*\*

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) \*\*

The Present \*\*

The Liar \*\*\* 1/2

Jitney \*\*\* 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) \*\*\* 1/2

Significant Other \* 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth \*\*\*

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) \*\* (third visit, but \*\*\* if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) \*\* 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) \*\*\* 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) \*\*\*\*

The Light Years \* 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) \*\*\* 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips \*\*

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) \*

Come From Away \*

Miss Saigon \*\*

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba \* 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s \*\*

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) \*\*\*

Latin History For Morons \* 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production)

Wakey Wakey \*\*\*

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) \*\*\*

CasablancaBox \*\* 1/2

Amélie \* 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong \*\*

Indecent \*\* 1/2

The Hairy Animal \*\*\*

The Antipodes \*\*

Anastasia \*\*

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory \*\*

Oslo \*\*\* 1/2

The Little Foxes \*\*

Groundhog Day \*\* 1/2

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***Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.***