

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Laurie Metcalf Breaks Down at *Other Place*; Revival No *Picnic*

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THE OTHER PLACE ** 1/2 out of ****
PICNIC * 1/2 out of ****
OPUS NO. 7 ** 1/2 out of ****
DECEIT * 1/2 out of ****

THE OTHER PLACE ** 1/2 out of ****
 MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE

Over-stuffed isn't quite the right word. I'm looking for a term that describes plays like this, plays with so many different storylines and ideas that they exhaust each other out. Whatever that word might be, playwright Sharr White attempts to juggle so many balls that it distracts from appreciating any of them.

White offers up a confessional play filled with a present-day presentation, flashbacks and delusional memories. We're told about a teenage daughter who runs away from home and tragically disappears forever, a man accused of luring her away who is driven to suicide, a world-class scientist turned marketing maven launching a new pill that will be worth billions on the market, a mental and/or physical breakdown and the irony of that scientist suddenly suffering from the very illness the pill combats... even though the scientist wasn't driven to study that illness because of any family history with the disease. Any one of these storylines would be rich material for a complex, interesting play. But the tottering structure overwhelms our interest in any one element.

Laurie Metcalf holds the stage as Juliana and is the main reason the show works to the degree that it does. Her tale is framed like a presentation at a medical conference, the very task Juliana is performing when she has an "episode," that is, shows the first signs of her medical condition. It's easy to see how this is all meant to tie together: Juliana suffers from an illness that messes with her memory, which is fine since she doesn't want to remember the terrible night when her daughter disappeared forever. False memories about the long-dead daughter reaching out to her mother and agreeing to meet at their weekend home (the other place of the title) are welcome indeed. Metcalf digs into every caustic, unpleasant, lashing out of Juliana as she sinks into despair, offering up what drama she can. Daniel Stern as her husband is more adrift. From scene to scene he seems to waver: is he the loving husband, the false memory of a philanderer, the tortured father who bitterly resents Juliana for driving away their daughter? Stern seems to choose none of the above and fades into the background.

Once we realize Juliana is having a breakdown and her memories are often self-deluding, nothing is left to happen. We might ponder exactly why her husband remains so loving, giving the tragic devastation Juliana perhaps unintentionally wrought but we certainly won't find the answer here. She's got a terrible disease and the very drug she's developed might perhaps offer help. Ironic? Yes, but also rather uninteresting.

In contrast, the set by Eugene Lee & Edward Pierce is a model of clarity. It uses wooden window frames staggered one on top of the other to create a vivid and striking wall. Juliana is trapped in her mind, unable to see out properly and the set captures that subtly and easily, especially when combined with the moody, striking lighting of Justin Townsend. Unfortunately, director Joe Mantello cannot bring his usual skills to bear on a work that is just as incapable as Juliana of seeing its way clearly to a story that doesn't get in its own way.

PICNIC * 1/2 out of ****

ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY AT AMERICAN AIRLINES THEATRE

Sometimes the stock of a playwright falls for a very good reason. Such is the case with William Inge, a wildly successful artist in the 1950s whose work quickly seemed dated and fell strongly out of favor. He's a modest talent whose most famous works -- *Bus Stop*, *Come Back Little Sheeba*, *Picnic* -- are at best modest entertainments. But you need the best possible casting to bring such slim material to light and that's far from the case in Roundabout's revival of *Picnic*. The show has impeccable actors in key roles, such as Mare Winningham, Ellen Burstyn, Elizabeth Marvel and Reed Birney.

But the young lovers at the show's heart -- the two people who can't keep their hands off each other and send their world a-tilting -- are played by Maggie Grace of *Lost* in her Broadway debut and Sebastian Stan of the film *Captain America* in his second Broadway show. Despite the almost laughably aggressive attempts to sex up Stan and his body (when he shows up late in the show and *still* hasn't buttoned up his shirt, it inspires chuckles), they have absolutely no chemistry together and one fears no chemistry with anyone else either. Even with the best casting in the world, this show would never be more than mild, passable fare. But without a beating heart at the center, it never comes to life

The story is banal, contrasting the many options of Grace's character (who is pretty and dating the handsomest and richest boy in town, the appealing Ben Rappaport) with the limited future of Marvel's spinster-ish schoolteacher. She's been dating Birney's businessman for years but he's in no hurry to get married. Aren't things fine the way they are?

The show has a few interesting moments of desperation, such as the scene where Marvel begs, literally begs Birney to call her the next morning after a night of passion. Similarly, Mare Winningham desperately clings to Grace's luggage when she sees her daughter throwing away her life on the layabout no good loser Stan.

But generally the show slides along, a mild chuckle here as middle-aged women gawp at the shirtless Stan, a mild moment of drama there as Stan and Grace give in to their passions and Stan loudly proclaims, "We ain't going to no picnic!"

The set by Andrew Lieberman is perfunctory at best, with the homes of Winningham and Burstyn abutting one another and sharing a tiny strip of lawn where all the action

takes place. It's all crowded right towards the edge of the stage, as if he couldn't be bothered to fill up the rest of the space. All the other tech elements from director Andrew Gold are equally bare. One feels everyone realized the play they were working with simply didn't inspire.

Any modest pleasures come from the sidelines, with Madeleine Martin doing what she can with Grace's tomboy little sister and Burstyn and Winningham standing around and reacting to what's going on. It's a relief just to have them sitting together towards the end of the show; you know you're in good hands. Shockingly, this is the very talented Winningham's Broadway debut (which should have happened long ago, most recently with the excellent drama *Tribes*). Hopefully, she'll return to Broadway very very soon in a much better show.

OPUS NO. 7 1/2 out of ******
ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE

The Russian troupe Dmitry Krymov Laboratory comes to St. Ann's with two one act pieces, one a meditation on World War II and the Holocaust, the other on the conflicted life and legacy of composer Dmitry Shostakovich, an artist who fell in and out of favor throughout his career in the Soviet Union and was a patsy of the totalitarian regime or perhaps a clever rebel who mocked them and made his protests through his music or more likely a man striving moment to moment to survive and do what he could.

Both pieces are essentially wordless spectacles, with the troupe beginning with some seemingly innocuous task (like splattering paint on a white wall) that slowly, marvelously expands into some visual stunner combining puppetry, circus-like antics and imaginative use of set design.



Photo by Pavel Antonov

Unquestionably both "Genealogy" and "Shostakovich" have their moments. You watch quietly as actors cut away at the cardboard backdrop, create shapes akin to the familiar silhouette of early 20th century Jews (the hat, the black clothes) and then before you know it, the silhouettes along the wall are "dancing" and moving as arms punch out through the cardboard and sway back and forth. Later one man holds "hands" with a painted group of children and then he steps away and his coat and hat remain, still holding hands with the children. In the highlight, holes in the wall open up and scraps of

newspaper swirl out at the audience in a storm of text and actors grab at the scraps and read off the names of the people who are missing. Video, text, photos and sound all combine with the actors and props like a seemingly endless outpouring of shoes (their owners long gone) to capture the disappearance of an entire people and way of life.

In "Shostakovich," the highlights are perhaps the cleverly ironic uses of his own music to tell the composer's story as he scrambles around Charlie Chaplin-like to avoid the bullets that pick off his contemporaries one by one. When Chaplin scampers this way and that, always just out of reach of the authorities, they finally pin him down not with guns but with medals, a giant Order Of Lenin that has a giant pin which slices through him completely. At one point -- somehow -- Shostakovich is dangling in mid-air, clutching for dear life to a chandelier while a man high above him holds on to the ornament and a piece of furniture is caught on the artist's foot. It's amusing and sad: they show a real empathy for Shostakovich, refusing to simply ennoble or denigrate a man trapped in such a difficult time.

Those moments stay with you. The problem is that each one takes quite a bit of effort to reach and Krymov has yet to find a theatrically satisfying way of holding our attention while each effect is slowly created. Yes, it's fun to see metal pianos bashing and clanging against each other like bumper cars and for a change the slow parade as they're wheeled into the performance space has a certain drama. But too often we simply sit and watch patiently while an effect is built, with the payoff only coming at the end.

If the on-stage creation of their imagery can become as intriguing as the peak moments, then Dmitry Krymov Laboratory will become not merely a worthy and interesting troupe but a great one.

DECEIT* 1/2 out of ****
THEATER FOR THE NEW CITY

Deceit is no way to live your life. That's the message of the uninteresting drama by Richard Ploetz that just now has discovered that people can create new identities online and enjoy secret second or even third lives separate from their "real" ones.

The protagonist is Frank, a businessman who has a wife and little boy. But online he goes by Bob and enjoys secretive gay assignations, sex without the commitment which is all he wants or thinks he needs, depending on whom he's talking to. "Bob" decides to open up to a reporter doing a story on men married to women who cheat with other men. That reporter happens to be working for... Frank's wife. That's further complicated by Frank starting to actually date a man (rather than just sleeping with him and moving on), a clerk at an Hermes store who befriends... Frank's wife! If you expect it all to come tumbling down and these various people to cross paths, you won't be disappointed.



Photo by Adele Bossard

A few modest moments provide a spark in this tale: a scene in a park in which Frank and his son must interact with Frank's boyfriend and a dinner party at which everyone shows up and the reporter and boyfriend find it impossible not to call Frank by his online name of "Bob."

Otherwise, it's just a banal rehash of familiar material, like Frank getting beat up during some rough sex, and some odd touches such as his son's bizarre habit of saving Frank's used dental floss. Despite the pedestrian script, Steven Hauck holds the stage as Frank. The script may not make much sense but Hauck keeps our attention and turns this thin conceit into a flesh and blood person. Glory Gallo is similarly solid as Frank's wife. They're a testament to the fact that even under the most straitened circumstances, talent will out, even if not all closeted businessmen can

do the same.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) ****

Chimichangas And Zoloff *

Closer Than Ever ***

Cock ** 1/2

Harvey with Jim Parsons *

My Children! My Africa! ***

Once On This Island ***

Potted Potter *

Storefront Church ** 1/2

Title And Deed ***

Picture Incomplete (NYMF) **

Flambe Dreams (NYMF) **

Rio (NYMF) **

The Two Month Rule (NYMF) *

Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2

Stealing Time (NYMF) **

Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2

Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ***

Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2

How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2

Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***

Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2

Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2

Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2

Living With Henry (NYMF) *

A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2

The Last Smoker In America **

Gore Vidal's The Best Man (w new cast) ***

Into The Woods at Delacorte ** 1/2

Bring It On: The Musical **

Bullet For Adolf *

Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc. **

Harrison, TX ***

Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck" (FringeNYC) * 1/2

Pink Milk (FringeNYC) * 1/2

Who Murdered Love (FringeNYC) no stars

Storytime With Mr. Buttermen (FringeNYC) **

#MormonInChief (FringeNYC) **

An Interrogation Primer (FringeNYC) ***

An Evening With Kirk Douglas (FringeNYC) *

Sheherizade (FringeNYC) **

The Great Pie Robbery (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Independents (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
The Dick and The Rose (FringeNYC) **
Magdalen (FringeNYC) ***
Bombsheltered (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Paper Plane (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Rated M For Murder (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Mallory/Valerie (FringeNYC) *
Non-Equity: The Musical! (FringeNYC) *
Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
City Of Shadows (FringeNYC) ***
Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking ***
Salamander Starts Over (FringeNYC) ***
Pieces (FringeNYC) *
The Train Driver ***
Chaplin The Musical * 1/2
Detroit ** 1/2
Heartless at Signature **
Einstein On The Beach at BAM ****
Red-Handed Otter ** 1/2
Marry Me A Little **
An Enemy Of The People ** 1/2
The Old Man And The Old Moon *** 1/2
A Chorus Line at Papermill ***
Helen & Edgar ***
Grace * 1/2
Cyrano de Bergerac **
Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? ***
Disgraced **
Annie ** 1/2
The Heiress **
Checkers ** 1/2
Ivanov ***
Golden Child at Signature ** 1/2
Giant at the Public *** 1/2
Scandalous * 1/2
Forever Dusty **
The Performers **
The Piano Lesson at Signature *** 1/2
Un Ballo In Maschera at the Met *** 1/2 (singing) * (production) so call it ** 1/2
A Christmas Story: The Musical **
The Sound Of Music at Papermill ***
My Name Is Asher Lev *** 1/2
Golden Boy **
A Civil War Christmas ** 1/2
Dead Accounts **
The Anarchist *
Glengarry Glen Ross **
Bare **
The Mystery Of Edwin Drood ** 1/2
The Great God Pan ** 1/2
The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2

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