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Theater: A Lacking "Significant Other," Triumphant "Skin Of Our Teeth," Promising Groban

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SIGNIFICANT OTHER * 1/2 out of ****

THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH *** out of ****

JOSH GROBAN IN THE GREAT COMET *** out of ****

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BOOTH THEATRE

Having missed *Bad Jews*, I was all the more eager to see Joshua Harmon's new play *Significant Other*. It's about Jordan, a 29 year old gay man who is NOT in a relationship. The show begins at the bachelorette party for one of his three BFFs. (One could typecast them via *Sex and the City* if so inclined.) Then a wedding and another bachelorette party and another wedding until like an Agatha Christie novel you realize along with Jordan, "and then there was one."

Why is the cute, adorable and funny Jordan still single? What's it like to watch your friends "grow up" and settle down and feel with an increasing sense of panic that life is passing you by and you are going to be alone for the rest of your life? These questions are followed by a swirl of bachelorette parties and weddings and failed dates and late night phone calls and still more hen parties and weddings and on and on and at the lonely center of it all is Jordan. Why can't he get a date? Why is he alone?

The play seems to wonder about this but we don't because the answer is obvious. Jordan is nuts. Literally. You want to set him up with a therapist, not a boyfriend. I'm not sure Harmon realizes the troubled, unhappy and specifically unhealthy person he's created. Perhaps writing too close to home about gay people has created a blind spot he didn't feel when the characters under his gaze were one step removed from him? All that's clear is that the play never remotely grapples with the person it has created.

Everything about *Significant Other* is off and deeply confusing. Jordan is 29 and worried about not settling

down? Well, 29 is the new 12, so who settles down at that age or worries about it if they haven't? These days, you might worry more *about* settling down at that age, not being single. Jordan's fears of being alone make more sense for a 49 year old, but put that aside. He's obsessive and needy and clearly focuses on unavailable guys who aren't interested in him or may not be gay or simply have no idea he exists. (These obsessions are just an excuse to avoid a real relationship, obviously.)

He did it in college with some guy, a brief description of which doesn't indicate even so much as a first date. He does it again with a handsome co-worker at his office, a person whom Jordan actually hangs out with one time by seeing a documentary film together. The guy may not be gay and doesn't even really evince anything beyond the polite possibility of being an acquaintance, if that. And yet Jordan sends the unsuspecting dude an email so detailed and emotionally need and desperate that anyone reading it would run in the other direction and perhaps get a court order.

Am I being clear here? Jordan is *troubled*. He apparently has no gay friends or even acquaintances (the only one we see is a campy coworker Jordan tellingly treats with disdain), he is probably self-loathing and it's not even clear that he's out to his wonderful grandmother (the lovely Barbara Barrie, who seems to have wandered in from real life, she's so grounded and real). You are not confused in the least as to why Jordan is alone. He doesn't like himself, sabotages any possibilities of friendship (not to mention actual dates), is filled with self-hatred and needs to get professional help, pronto. That's why!

But Harmon hasn't written a play about a guy with mental health issues. He seems to believe this is a

comic drama with something searing to say about the pain of loneliness in the modern world. But because Jordan isn't just a normal guy with normal hang-ups who is unlucky in love or hasn't met the right fellow yet, he's un-relatable -- unless you too have serious issues to work through that are blocking you from even the beginnings of an adult relationship. And since the play never grapples with his genuine problems, everything it does argue about is a boring distraction. You keep waiting for someone to shake him or to learn the *real* reasons why Jordan is so damaged. Instead, he just becomes more bitter and lonely and sad. A last minute stab at hanging out with another co-worker might be seen as a sign of growth -- a hint at a better future, maybe -- but to me it was just a sign of how desperate he'd become.

The fault here begins and ends with the playwright. But it certainly isn't helped by one of the most ungainly and awkward sets I've seen in a long time. Mark Wendland (who did sterling work on Pacino's *Merchant Of Venice*) simply threw everything up on stage and left it there, including the kitchen sink. Fighting for attention is the grandmother's den stuck behind Jordan's den, a kitchen area near an office break-room area, an apartment door, two flights of ugly stairs plopped down in the middle, a few other random spaces, chandeliers, a disco ball, blinding white bulbs and a gigantic traffic light. All of it crammed onstage and visible throughout the show. With all that stuff piled on top of one another, it's remarkable how little sense of a particular space (like someone's home or an office or a street) ever comes through. In one low point, a couple leaving Jordan's apartment must go through a maze to create the illusion of them leaving, rather than simply letting the poor folks exit the stage.

Needless to say, the other tech elements fight with this mess and can do little, though the costumes of Kaye Voyce have their moments in defining character and aren't *too* jokey given the many opportunities weddings and bachelorette parties offer.

Director Trip Cullman bears responsibility along with Wendland. On the bright side, Cullman has honed the cast to fine effect. Moment to moment, you have some fun broad characters (and fun broads) with some fitfully funny lines. Sas Goldberg (good in her opening monologue), Rebecca Naomi Jones and Lindsay Mendez all do solid work with pretty thin material. Both Luke Smith and especially John Behlmann have fun playing various men. Whatever the staging difficulties, it seemed a wasted opportunity to have Behlmann play the latest object of desire for Jordan and yet only two of the husbands for his pals, instead of all three.

Gideon Glick is as appealing as his character ultimately is not. He impressed in *Spring Awakening* and *Speech and Debate* and *Wild Animals You Should Know* and numerous other shows. From light comedy to serious drama in this piece, he pours his all into a part and a play that aren't worthy of his talent. Glick is only the right role away from bigger things and will surely get there soon. From a scene where he and Mendez goof on Celine Dion to a funny solo turn where he practically dances with his laptop while trying to resist sending an email, Glick is very funny. It's not his fault Glick can't make sense of a climactic meltdown that feels more self-indulgent and tiresome than heartrending.

It's a pleasure to see the marvelous Barbara Barrie playing Jordan's grandmother, a woman whose

husband has died, jokes about assisted suicide and offers some sound advice to her troubled grandson. He's clearly unhappy and she says something about life. "It's a long book, she says." She tells him he's in a really tough chapter, but the book is loooong. It's a sweet moment, filled with a little wisdom. Still, I couldn't help thinking to myself, yes, but I don't think the book he's in is a romance by Jane Austen. I'm worried Jordan's book is *Anna Karenina*.

THE SKIN OF OUR TEETH *** out of ****

POLONSKY SHAKESPEARE CENTER OF THEATRE FOR A NEW AUDIENCE

I'm a little overwhelmed. This was my first experience with Thornton Wilder's 1942 Pulitzer Prize winner *The Skin Of Our Teeth*. One can easily imagine why this fragmented, dizzying and despairing (but hopeful!) show spoke to audiences back then, what with war sweeping the globe. One can't call it unconventional since even that timid description implies a work that allows for convention as a departure point.

Way back in 1942, Wilder deconstructed the play, tossed in Biblical references, songs, nonsense, broke down the fourth wall, built up the fourth wall again just so he could knock it back down, brought on dinosaurs to play some jaunty music, depicted the end of the world, staged a rehearsal and then started things up all over again, beginning as it started with an actress speaking right to the audience. Just like James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, often mentioned as a rather direct inspiration. War or no war, the play feels theatrically bold today, so back then it must have seemed shocking indeed.

It's also *huge*, with a massive cast, head-spinning changes in tone, an impending Ice Age and a storm of Biblical proportions. End of the world type stuff. I'll boldly assert it probably reads better than it plays – or at least reads more *easily* and thus taunts you into thinking you can lick this and do a definitive production. Then you start to mount the damn thing and the wonderfully ungainly beast shows you who is boss.

That doesn't happen here, not for me, not this first time. I was kind of besotted by the vision of director Arin Arbus, even as I thought perhaps here and there a transition or change in style might have been done better. *The Skin Of Our Teeth* is apparently one of those masterpieces that never quite gets the definitive production you can imagine in your head. Think Sondheim's *Follies* or Bernstein's *Candide* and you'll know what I mean. No matter how good any individual production of them may be, it's gonna bulge out awkwardly here and there and you'll be convinced an even better version is tantalizingly within reach.

So anyone who hasn't seen this show yet – and it's rarely done – should not waste a moment to see it done with verve and determination. The costumes of Cait O'Connor and the inventive set of Riccardo Hernandez are treats, especially the family home that breaks apart, flies up to the skies, falls under ground and otherwise works a treat in numerous ways.

Oh, the story. It centers on a family and watching them makes a lot more sense than describing them for disaster is always on the horizon in this three act epic.

In Act One, an Ice Age is encroaching on the New Jersey home of the upstanding Antrobus family. Father (David Rasche) is an important inventor (coming up with useful ideas like the alphabet and the wheel). Mother (Kecia Lewis) is a formidable matriarch and their two children are a handful. (Kimber Monroe and Reynaldo Pinella, good in two parts that are likely almost impossible to do well – as with most actors in the show, at some points they're great and at others you want them to go back and try another note or something different or work on a transition some more; it's that kind of a nutty show.) Their maid Sabina (Mary Wiseman) is always threatening to give her notice, when not stopping the play and complaining to the audience she can't make sense of it. Meanwhile the world is effectively ending with hordes of people wandering around as a new Ice Age dawns.

In Act Two the family is on the Boardwalk of Atlantic City. I think it was a flashback, where we see the prominent Mr. Antrobus seduced by a beauty contestant who would become his second wife and then be demoted to maid. Oh and the world ends again in a terrible flood, while the Antrobus family heads Noah-like to the safety of a boat, joined by animals trouping along two by two. (They've done this before.)

In Act Three, the world has ended again in a way, with the denouement of a seven year war. The Antrobus family pick themselves up, dust themselves off and start all over again. Like the actors playing the kids, most everyone in the sprawling cast shone at certain parts and stumbled a little at others. The casually handsome Austin Reed Alleman was fun as a Lothario and then amusing as an awkward usher and probably good in seven other bits I didn't catch quickly enough. I wasn't sure a rehearsal scene in which his nervous usher suddenly emoted as a philosopher with precision and grace made sense. (In *my* version

of *The Skin Of Our Teeth*, it'll be delivered with a direct simplicity, the common touch.) But that's what Arbus wanted, I'm sure.

I have no complaints about the three leads at the center of this three-ring circus. My guest thought Rasche as Mr. Antrobus wasn't quite on top of his lines. I noted that as well but considered it part of his blustery delivery, the inevitable tongue-tripping of a flim-flam man working hard to discover which con will work at any given moment. Lewis is a marvel as Mrs. Antrobus, anchoring the plot with her complete conviction in whatever nonsense is happening around her. That's no surprise to those who saw her step in at the last minute in the Mt. Everest of a role of *Mother Courage* at Classic Stage Company. More recently she triumphed as Sister Rosetta Tharpe in *Marie and Rosetta* and I can't wait to see what she does next. And yet the career-making role of *The Skin Of Our Teeth*, the part that proved a triumph for Tallulah Bankhead and then a triumph for Miriam Hopkins and then again for Elizabeth Scott is Sabina. True to form, it's an absolute triumph for Mary Wiseman, whose stock has been soaring recently and should now go through the roof. If nothing else, you'll want to see her completely own the stage in such a tremendous part. She's funny, sexy, screwball, piercing and pretty damn great — think Lucille Ball but then go crazy and think Barbara Stanwyck. That good.

At certain points, so many people are on stage with her, you'd swear you're at the opera. There's music and humor and skits and rehearsals and the director yells stuff from the rafters at the actors and then comes on stage and it's chaotic and crazy and I was intrigued and caught up from start to finish. Not wholly satisfied somehow, but how could you be? I'm frustrated that this is the first time I've seen it when *Our Town* is mounted again and again. Similarly out of sight are most of Wilder's one act plays, at least most of the time. Like any great play, *Skin* now seems very timely -- with its whiff of dishonest politicians and the world spinning out of control, you'd swear it was written last week. And you'll want to see it next week and then again a year from now.

Sure it's hard to put on, but it should be seen and not read and this perhaps inevitably flawed but fascinating and rather moving presentation by Arbus makes that abundantly clear.

JOSH GROBAN IN THE GREAT COMET *** out of ****

IMPERIAL THEATRE

I've reviewed this musical twice, once in 2013 and again when it was mounted on Broadway. I returned once more to catch singer Josh Groban, who will surely be in the running for a Tony nomination alongside the leads from *Dear Evan Hansen*, *Groundhog Day* and a handful of other likely contenders.

When they announced Groban would make his Broadway (and really, stage debut) in *The Great Comet*, I was puzzled. This musical was a bold, challenging piece and stunt casting of a non-actor felt wildly inappropriate. Shouldn't they have saved shoving in someone like Groban for a year into the run?

I didn't factor in two reasons.

One, Groban's appeal to the theater-going crowd (which is mostly women) is immense. He has been a massive box office draw from day one, turning what might have been a difficult sell (a musical version of *War & Peace*?) into a sure thing that can establish its bona fides as a draw with Groban as insurance.

Two, Groban is good. Turns out this is not a pop star stepping in a la *Chicago*'s revolving door of a tourist trap. Groban is delivering an unassuming, restrained and nuanced performance as an overweight older man burdened by his unhappy life. We know his voice can soar and indeed a new song has been written for Pierre in Act One called "Dust And Ashes" that allows him to scale the heights.

But it's notable that while performing in the musical Groban does this in character; he soars, but he doesn't show off. It's not strictly the pure beauty he's capable of in concert. Don't worry, fans; you'll be satisfied. But he sings while keeping the story in mind throughout, even here when given the chance to let loose. Groban is playing an older, broken down, bitter man and never forgets it. He's angry and sad and rueful and that's reflected in his voice. This is an ensemble and he fits in very nicely indeed.

The show is mostly a spectacle but it has one especially affecting moment at the climax in which Groban's Pierre and the socially disgraced Natasha have a meeting of the souls. It's quiet, lovely, emotional and Groban – paired with the show's breakout star Denée Benton – is every bit its equal. I imagine his performance will keep getting better. And what seemed like stunt casting to me now appears to be the

promising start to what could be an interesting career in theater. Next time, don't force the guy to be so frumpy and they'll be battering down the doors.

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 Others * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

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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.