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Theater: A Modest "Life," Lack Of "Love Love Love" and Fringe Fun With "Rolfe"

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A LIFE ** 1/2 out of ****

LOVE LOVE LOVE ** 1/2 out of ****

THE RADICALIZATION OF ROLFE ** 1/2 out of ****

A LIFE ** 1/2

PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS

It's no accident that the name of the space that is presenting the world premiere of Adam Bock's new work is called Playwrights Horizons. They invariably provide a first class production with a strong cast and some surprisingly elaborate sets, all of it in service of the playwright. You can fault the play, but not the opportunity it was given to be seen in the best possible light. That's certainly the case here with a dramatic piece that is rather slight, perhaps intentionally so, but certainly given first class treatment.

[If you're in NYC and planning to see *A Life*, don't read any further. It's impossible to discuss without spoiling major plot twists. Of course, any show that's really good is better than any "surprises" in the plot, but it's certainly less fun the first time around to know what's going to happen. Since its appeal is modest in any way, why spoil what little oomph there is to be had?]

That first class treatment begins with its star David Hyde Pierce, an actor with the unusual task of playing against the laughs while working towards them organically. He has such good will after years of Emmy-winning work on *Frasier* that people laugh when he enters a room, picks up a phone or raises an eyebrow. But Pierce is a consummate stage performer and he spends the first few minutes of *A Life* establishing his character, setting the tone for this wistful story and quietly and efficiently moving people beyond that easy laughter into the reality of the world his character inhabits.

That character is Nate and for quite a chunk of the show, you might imagine this is going to be a one-man

monologue. (I avoid reading Playbills in advance if I can so the number of people in the cast is sometimes a mystery to me.) Nate talks about his latest boyfriend to slip away, how he got into astrology, frequent references to his best friend Curtis and why they never dated ("He's my best friend!" Nate says, incredulous that you would ask. He is the sort of gay man who perhaps never quite imagined getting married and so a best friend may be the most stable relationship he'll ever have.) Nate is chatting to us in his living room, a nondescript New York City apartment and when after quite a while (15 minutes? 20 minutes?) Curtis actually enters, it almost comes as a shock.

Not as much of a shock as when Nate drops dead a few minutes later, however.

What follows are scenes of Nate's friend Curtis when he finds the body, it's taken away, we watch technicians prepare it for the funeral and Nate is buried. It's all rather low-key and matter-of-fact and perhaps what I admired most about this minor key piece is what Bock didn't do: there's no attempt to make Nate's life more than it is or to focus on what might have been. (His friend Curtis seems to be what he is, a friend as opposed to "the one" that might have been his true love.) When Nate is being prepped, we see Curtis dropping off items like a tie and cufflinks to the funeral people but Bock does not show him stumbling on the body. Nor is any attempt made to show how indifferent those who deal with bodies every day must be: they are of course coolly professional, but they're not cruel or rudely indifferent — you can only hope your body is treated with the same dispassionate care someday. Nate pops back to offer some banalities but that too is cut off — Bock is not here to tell us what happens After or deliver life lessons. Nate's life is just that — a life, no more or less important than anyone else.

And yet, it all feels a tad purposeless. When Nate enters his apartment before dying, suddenly we can hear his thoughts in a prerecorded segment. They're almost amusing, but hardly necessary. The same is true when we hear a few scattered comments by Nate after he dies while others tend to his remains and the remains of his existence. They add nothing philosophically and very little humor-wise. So why bother? One might say the same thing about the very lengthy monologue that began the show. Pierce holds our attention but it's certainly due more to his skill than anything of a compelling nature in the monologue itself. One tries to grab onto a reason for this play to be written and it slips away, much like his life.

But again, it's been given a very solid presentation which is its own reward. The set by Laura Jellinek is a treat. It tilts entirely backwards until the "roof" is the back wall, allowing Nate's life to be upended while seamlessly allowing the front of the stage to become the back room of a funeral parlor. Then it tilts again and we see a wooden wall with an entrance peering into darkness, a fine setting for a funeral with the entrance soon clearly doubling as a grave site. It's elegant and simple and somehow more compelling in its direct link between life and death than anything in the script.

The sound design by Mikhail Fiksel is also notable — it's not allowed to be invisible like most sound designs because a substantial amount of humor comes from the sounds of the city, not to mention the oddly extended passage where we stare at Nate's body. The use of voice-over is not effective but that's the problem of Bock's dialogue, not the design.

Director Anne Kaufman oversees a very strong cast that makes the most of their characters, with five actors populating the stage in multiple roles. All of them are excellent, with Brad Heberlee as Curtis appealing enough to make you wonder, yeah, why didn't Nate date him? It's the sort of natural curiosity too little of this *Life* prompts from the viewer.

LOVE LOVE LOVE ** 1/2

ROUNDAABOUT THEATRE COMPANY AT LAURA PELS THEATRE

Playwright Mike Bartlett always has something substantial on his mind, sometimes to his benefit and here, perhaps, not so much. I thought *King Charles III* was one of the best plays of 2015 and loved its mashup of Shakespeare and tabloid fascination with the Royals. I didn't get to see *Earthquakes In London*, but I'll take my friend Noam's word on it that this sprawling work was flawed but so rich and ambitious that one had to admire and even love it. *Cock* was a little dated in its fascination with a guy who could be torn between a girl and a guy, but was enjoyable in its staging and tight focus. That doesn't even include numerous other works that haven't leapt the Pond, like his adaptation of *Chariots Of Fire*.

Now here we have *Love, Love, Love*, a decades-spanning work that has a lot on its mind indeed. It begins on June 25, 1967 with two brothers in London. One is Henry, a hard-working but blunt working class lad (Alex Hurt) with a date coming over. The other is Kenneth, an Oxford-attending layabout (Richard Armitage) who has worked hard at losing his working class accent, lounges around in a dressing gown like a toff and loves to

mess with his brother. When said bird Sandra (Amy Ryan) comes in and immediately steamrolls over both of them, we're in classic comedy territory. Will there be a threesome? Smoking of pot? Hurt feelings? Anything's possible in *Swinging London*, especially when the Beatles are on TV capping off a worldwide broadcast with the debut of their new single "All You Need Is Love."

Act two leaps ahead to 1989. Sandra and Kenneth are married, living in suburban comfort. Like the wealthy winners in *The Big Chill*, they seem to have left behind their Sixties idealism about changing the world but not their selfish desire to enjoy anything and everything they want. (Later one line has it that they didn't change the world, they bought it.) Sandra forgot — *again* — about a concert being given by their classically trained daughter Rose (Zoe Kazan). And though it's the last thing Rose wants, Sandra is determined her stick in the mud child stay up till midnight to celebrate turning 15...I mean 16! Who can keep track? Not these parents, who are clearly not paying attention to their kids and may each be having an affair. When they're not being indifferent, the son Jamie (Ben Rosenfield) is being cruel.

Act three leaps to the present. Jamie, who seemed rather bright and confident, is now a catatonic mess. Rose is still bitter over her parents and their utter lack of responsibility while the long-divorced Kenneth and Sandra are toying with the idea that maybe they're meant for each other after all.

Each act is somewhat satisfying on its own terms and indeed might well be enjoyed *more* if seen on their own. It's only when you see all three acts together that you feel the heavy desire of Bartlett to impose some political ideas onto this folderol. He's striving for a comment on the idealistic Sixties, perhaps, or the entitled

children they gave birth to or perhaps both or neither. The more the play pushes the political angle, the less sense it makes. And ultimately, none of it makes sense dramatically. Rose complains vociferously that her parents “pushed” her into a classical music career when she clearly isn’t that good. They respond by blithely wondering why she listened to them; they rebelled against their parents, why didn’t she? But that’s beside the point. We’ve seen her parents paid virtually no attention to their kids, much less foisted careers on them, so Rose’s complaint makes no sense. Similarly, we see their son Jamie clearly upset his parents are divorcing — we know, because he starts gobbling up cake. Fair enough, but it was 1989 and he seemed smart and confident otherwise, so why would he go completely off the rails into Rain Man territory? A chemical imbalance? Over-medication? Fine, but none of that is indicated. In fact, true to form, the parents leave him be.

If Bartlett wanted to tackle the idea of a generation for the first time in modern Western history being less well off than their parents, he has not done so here, clouded as this story is with characters and events at cross-purposes to that conflict. What *Love, Love, Love* has is not a lot of love, except for the love one feels for the cast directly ably by Michael Mayers.

Kazan somehow gives much-needed dignity to the whining Rose and Rosenfield is dangerously appealing whether taunting his sister or sliding into hippie-like indifference. Hurt can’t do much with the one-note Henry but he does keep the humor rooted in anger at watching a smarter sibling get all the chances he never will. Armitage is very strong as the single-minded, willfully selfish Kenneth. While Ryan’s accent may slip hither and yon, there’s no doubting she’s in complete command of the stage as Sandra, giving depth at the one brief moment towards the end when Sandra is allowed to be more than an *AbFab* monstrosity. And thank God they paid up for the rights to “All You Need Is Love;” the last thing you want is to be teased by a classic Beatles tune and then only hear a snippet. Here we get it all, pretty much, even if Kenneth and Sandra seemed to miss the point that “love” does not mean merely “self-love.”

THE RADICALIZATION OF ROLFE ** 1/2

SOHO PLAYHOUSE

I came for the camp and stayed for the drama. The Radicalization Of Rolfe sounded like a typical FringeFest goof — a spin on *The Sound Of Music* that focused on the telegram messenger boy Rolfe (and would-be boyfriend of Liesl). Here we find out Rolfe is a closeted gay man (well, 17 going on 18) struggling with his feelings for Johan while enjoying for the first time a sense of acceptance and importance after joining the Nazi Party. I expected a nutty gay romp, but what I got in the play by Andrew Bergh was a piece that took that silly concept pretty seriously. Sure you get the jokes about climbing every mountain but he’s crafted an effective piece that’s more *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern* than Carol Burnett. It’s well-acted and precisely what one hopes for from the FringeFest: a good showcase for talent that will hopefully go on to bigger and better things.

You know the story of the new governess for the children of Captain Von Trapp, of course. What we are

watching is the behind the scenes action. The Nazis are preparing to invade, the staff is peppered with spies like Franz (Jay Patterson) and messenger boy Rolfe (Logan Sutherland) has just been recruited by the local Nazi ringleader Zeller (Dominic Comperatore). We soon discover that Rolfe has also been “recruited” by Johan (Alex J. Gould), his friend from the local athletic club. Johan’s aunt also works for the Von Trapp family, but unlike Franz, Frau Schmidt (Polly Adams) is loyal to her employer and loyal to the nephew she knows is a deviant but does everything she can to protect anyway.

Rolfe is conflicted in every possible way: he wants the respectability of Liesl (not to mention the money) and she *is* very nice. But it’s Johan he wants in every way that matters. Yet he’s a poor lad and Zeller treats him like a man, not to mention encouraging Rolfe to enter the music festival and maybe get on the radio. First, of course, Rolfe must get Zeller the info he wants and if that means deflowering the girl to get it, what does Zeller care? What’s a poor, but awfully pretty messenger boy with a gorgeous singing voice to do??!!



(Photo copyright Dixie Sheridan)

The Radicalization Of Rolfe gets progressively more serious as it goes along, rather effectively. Adams has the least interesting role as Frau Schmidt and it’s notable that she’s also burdened with many of the obvious jokes one expected going in, jokes that work references to curtains and song lyrics in wherever it can. The rest of the cast is notably stronger, with Patterson quite good as the self-serving Franz, Gould believable as the

winning Johan (though this makes it harder to believe Rolfe wouldn't run away) and especially Comperatore as Zeller. He brings a nasty, but very realistic zing to every scene he's in.

Sutherland is suitably charming as Rolfe but the play is so good it's a pity they didn't ditch some of the easy jokes and push Rolfe towards a more complete transformation. Rolfe should be more genuinely conflicted at the start. And towards the end — when the Von Trapps have escaped and the noose is tightening around his world — Rolfe should look scared for his life, not merely exhausted and a little dismayed.

But let's not downplay what Bergh, director Abigail Zealey Bess and their cast did accomplish. They took a one-joke idea and turned it into a well-acted, surprisingly compelling bit of theater, a credit to all involved.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise ***

Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2

Something Rotten ***

Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

Broadway & The Bard * 1/2

Prodigal Son **

A Bronx Tale: The Musical **

Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **

Nice Fish ***

Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***

Hughie **

Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2

Straight ** 1/2

Eclipsed ***

Red Speedo ***

The Royale ** 1/2

Boy ****

The Robber Bridegroom ***

Hold On To Me, Darling ***

Blackbird ** 1/2

Disaster! *

The Effect ** 1/2

Dry Powder ** 1/2

Head Of Passes ** 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2

The Crucible (w Ben Wishaw) ***

Bright Star **

She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***

Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***

RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2

Nathan The Wise ** 1/2

The Father **

American Psycho **

Waitress ** 1/2

Fully Committed ** 1/2

Long Day's Journey Into Night ***

A Streetcar Named Desire (w Gillian Anderson) ***

Tuck Everlasting **

War **

Paramour * 1/2

Troilus & Cressida (Shakespeare in the Park) ** 1/2

Cats (on Broadway, 2016 revival) **

The Encounter (Complicite on Broadway) **

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (at Two River Theater) ***

Oh, Hello ** 1/2

Heisenberg ** 1/2

The Dudleys ** 1/2

Holiday Inn * 1/2

A Life ** 1/2

Love Love Love ** 1/2

The Radicalization Of Rolfe (FringeFest NYC) ** 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.