
Theater: Alec Baldwin Adopts *Orphans*, Fiona Shaw Delivers *The Testament of Mary*

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ORPHANS ** 1/2 out of ****
THE TESTAMENT OF MARY ** 1/2 out of ****
THE DRAWER BOY ** out of ****

Two revivals and one new play all reveal works that are in some way flawed -- but at least one good performance in each make the shows worth checking out for serious theater fans.

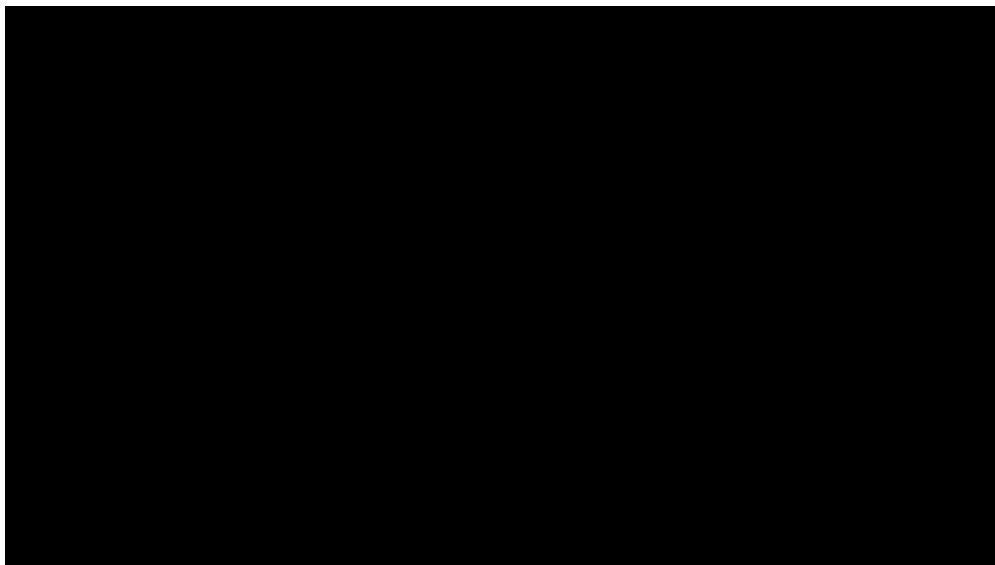
ORPHANS ** 1/2 out of ****
GERALD SCHOENFELD THEATRE

Time has not been kind to *Orphans*, an award-winning play that has the imprimatur of Steppenwolf, a list of major stars that have tackled key roles (including Albert Finney in the so-so movie version) and a long history of successful regional productions. It's easy to see why small theater companies like it: this three-hander by Lyle Kessler has one set; is filled with juicy, showy parts; and boasts a solid middle section almost guaranteed to score some laughs. It's also pure hokum, with broad types rather than real characters and a deflating finale after the show runs out of steam.

Ben Foster (in his Broadway debut and practically his theater debut as well) stars as Phillip, a two-bit tough guy who indulges in petty crime to keep him and his little brother in tuna fish. Their folks left long ago, with mom dying and dad taking off. That left Phillip with Treat (Tom Sturridge) and at first it seems like Treat is a weighty responsibility. Treat apparently has never left their home (not since he was very small, at least) and these two young men are trapped together.

Treat bounds around like a puppy, trying to never touch the floor as he leaps from couch to chair to windowsill and waiting breathlessly for Phillip to come home and maybe bring him some more Hellman's mayonnaise. He might be mentally or at least physically challenged, or so it seems. But then we realize Treat has apparently taught himself to read, loves new words, can remember every movie he's seen (and he's seen a lot of them) and is pretty smart after all. Phillip told Treat he'll die from allergies if Treat steps outside, but was that to protect him from getting lost or to keep him home and dependent on his older brother? They're alone in the world, but Phillip soon seems a lot more vulnerable than the open-hearted Treat.

That becomes crystal clear when Phillip brings home a drunken businessman named Harold (Alec Baldwin). Harold is holding a briefcase filled with valuable stocks and bonds so Phillip devises a cockamamie plan to hold Harold for ransom and make a million bucks. Too bad no one gives a damn about Harold and in fact the people Phillip contacts sound like they'd rather see Harold dead. In a very satisfying twist, Harold escapes his bonds, befriends Treat and takes Phillip under his wing. They're orphans, dead end kids just like Harold was and he wants to help them. But is Harold using them the way Phillip used Treat? Maybe he just needs a place to hide.



That's the set-up under the brisk direction of Daniel Sullivan; but this revival can't paper over the shortcomings of the original

work and it's stronger on the comedy than the whiplash changes from humorous to serious. That split personality is personified by the awkward score of Tom Kitt, who veers from rock and roll in the early scenes to soppy sentiment towards the end.

The costumes by Jess Goldstein combine with the sets of John Lee Beatty for the show's most effective moment: the transformation of the home and the clothes of the characters from act one to act two. Just seeing the place spiffed up, Phillip in a sharp new suit and Treat lovingly cradle yellow loafers draw the best laughs of the evening.

Baldwin is a pro and has fun as Harold, the gangster on the lam. He certainly doesn't miss any opportunities for laughs, though without stronger support he can't hit it out of the park. Sturridge is a solid stage actor and does well in a very tricky part -- Treat can easily be infantilized, played to the hilt for easy sympathy. Sturridge doesn't quite get prickly as Treat, but it's not a performance that sacrifices authenticity for playing to the audience. Foster is the weak link here. In what is clearly his first major stab at stage acting, he has stayed on his feet. Foster nails most of the humor but can't quite pull off the tricky transitions that Phillip must go through. He wavers from unstable to sweet, from dangerous to passive, from dominating to eager to please and Foster doesn't make those changes convincing. To be fair, Phillip is a confusing construct, an idea of a hood desperate for a father figure more than a flesh and blood character. Foster can hold his head up; with more time, more experience and a better play, he might show the same talent on stage he's demonstrated in film.

Orphans will never be an orphan; it's proven too commercially successful over the years for community theater to abandon it now. But this Broadway stint has shone a harsh spotlight on a work that wisely avoided the glare its first time around.

THE TESTAMENT OF MARY ** 1/2 out of **** WALTER KERR THEATRE

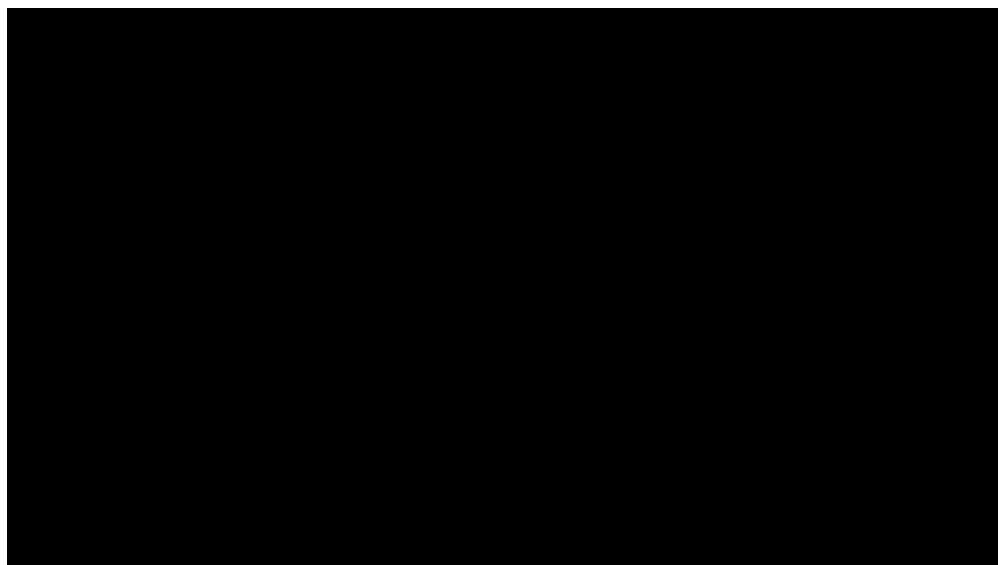
I'm a big fan of author Colm Toibin, from his work at The London Review Of Books to his nonfiction to his brilliant evocation of the writer Henry James in *The Master*. If you want to sample his work, start with *Brooklyn*, a marvelous novel that is engaging enough to be perfect for book clubs but brilliant enough to prove deeper and more satisfying than a mere entertainment. (Though god knows, a mere entertainment is something to be cherished.) Here's a profile I did of him back in 2004.

I'm also a Catholic who has loved works that draw inspiration from the Gospels, from *The Last Temptation Of Christ* to the *Jesus Tales* of playwright Romulus Linney. So you can believe I was excited to plunge into his new novel *The Testament Of Mary*, a monologue of sorts in which the mother of Jesus sorts through her emotions while living in a small home, constantly questioned by followers for details about his death and resurrection and dealing with the pain of having watched her child be brutally executed. While there are details not strictly kosher, it is by no means a disruptive or shocking work. It's an author giving voice to a woman who has figured prominently in Christianity but has rarely been allowed to speak. I admired the skill of his work but frankly this brief book failed to get under my skin.

Still, in the blink of an eye it has been adapted into a monologue by Toibin and staged on Broadway with the great Fiona Shaw as Mary under the direction of her longtime collaborator Deborah Warner. I've never forgiven myself for missing Shaw and Warner tackle T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (at the time, \$40 for a 40 minute performance was too rich for me). So seeing them now is a treat.

Assuredly, they have breathed life and humor and sweat and tears into Toibin's piece, from the surreal set (Tom Pye) to the evocative music and sound design (Mel Mercier) to the pre-show spectacle of placing Mary in a glass box staring out beatifically into the audience while ticket holders are allowed to walk around on stage, taking pictures and trying to avoid the rather large bird perched on a shelf of sorts. This piece might have simply presented Shaw alone on a stage baring her soul; instead, they've judiciously created some genuine theater.

Here's video of the creative team chatting with Broadwayworld.com about the show.



Certainly hearing Shaw intone the words of Toibin (words he has condensed down to their essence) adds greatly to their effect. Mary is living alone sometime after her son has died. (She can't bring herself to say his name because it might break

her.) Every day, followers of him come to Mary and ask her about those final days and other details of Jesus. They insist that their words will change the world. "All of it?" she asks puckishly. Oh yes, all of it.

Some wonderful insights emerge. Like most parents, it's hard for Mary to see her son as a prophet and leader; that's not heretical, surely. She also characterizes his followers as misfits; Jesus drew the misfits to him, though he wasn't one himself she insists. Mary tells of the wedding where Jesus began his public ministry, how people started treating her so very different just because she was his mother and the terrible, wrenching final day of the crucifixion.

For some reason, the raising of Lazarus always brings out the best in artists. Martin Scorsese made that miracle the awe-inspiring center of his film version of *The Last Temptation Of Christ*. Toibin also finds inspiration in the story, using brilliant imagery to show the frightening reality of how it happened and the way Lazarus perhaps was distraught over being pulled back into this world. It's a high point of a show that could use more focus and storytelling like that.

Above all, we are watching a woman in mourning. (The Gospels don't mention Jesus appearing to Mary after his Resurrection.) Even if her son has risen from the dead (a dream she had that it happened has since been repeated back to her as if it were fact), Mary still suffered the inutterable agony of seeing him die in a particularly painful, terrible way. Fearing for her life, she fled the scene before it was over. But when Mary bares her body and bathes in water onstage, it's not a baptism for forgiveness, it's an attempt to wash away the pain. Like any mother, she wishes this horror had never happened. He died to save the world? It wasn't worth it.

This simple, stark piece has some vivid moments, as I said. But by and large it's more vague than moment-to-moment transfixing. Shaw is surely the ideal person to deliver it. Every nuance, every laugh, every bitter insight available is drawn out of the work by her. The lighting (by Jennifer Tipton) and sound work hard to keep the proceedings varied and building to emotional peaks, with subtle changes in background lighting and the echoing crash of a chair being tossed onto the stage amplified. Simply having Shaw lug around a ladder the way Jesus shouldered the Cross (or to be accurate, probably the cross beam) can be an intriguing touch. They can't fully dramatize what is an internal and not wholly illuminating monologue, but they certainly do their best.

Frankly, it's all there at the beginning before the play proper even starts. The audience lines up in the aisles and then troops onstage, like visitors to Lourdes. They walk around, stare at the props, take photographs and encircle the glass box where Mary is sitting on a chair, holding flowers and staring ahead with an inscrutable look of warmth or wisdom or is it indifference on her face. Mary is a mother, a woman, a wife, a parent -- that's her testament. She's a living, breathing person. But even before she's opened her mouth Mary has been boxed in, put on display and positioned more like a statue than a human being. After all, that's what draws the crowds. And when she's behind glass you never have to worry about her stating any uncomfortable truths.

THE DRAWER BOY ** out of ** SOHO PLAYHOUSE**

It took far too long for *The Drawer Boy* by Michael Healey to make its New York debut. This solid, low-key effort may be set on a farm in Canada in the 1970s, but it's a universal story. The play debuted in 1999 and has been a major regional hit ever since. Like *Orphans*, this play is a three-hander that only needs a kitchen and a small outdoor space to tell its story. The staging at Soho Playhouse is far from ideal and only one of the three actors really nails their role, but it's enough to see the piece has merit.

The story is simple. Miles (Alex Fast) is a very earnest actor who has come to this small town with a troupe. They're embedding themselves in the lives of local farmers so they can create a new piece that captures what life is like for this community. Morgan (Brad Fryman) is nonplussed by the kid's eager desire to capture truth and beauty and the plight of the farmer. But a farm can always use an extra pair of hands so he lets the kid stay. Miles soon understands how isolated Morgan truly is since the stoic farmer's main contact day after day is Angus (William Laney). They were best friends fighting overseas when Angus was hit during the Blitz and became the rather slow and simple man he is today, incapable of remembering much of anything but the simplest of daily chores. Miles has to introduce himself to Angus over and over again.

Needless to say, the well-intentioned but rather clueless Miles upends their routine with disastrous, even dangerous results. He overhears Morgan repeating the story of how Angus got injured. It's clearly an oft-told tale involving London, possible war brides that get killed in an auto accident and plans for a home that would contain two families on one farm, a home that was never built. Miles uses this story in the theater piece his company is working on. Morgan is humiliated, it seems, but Angus is thrilled. He understands what Miles was doing ("That was us!") and even remembers it. For the first time he actually *remembers* the story and who Miles is and the details of the tragedy that stunted their lives. Angus wants to visit the graves of the two women they were going to marry. The only problem, we realize, is that the story isn't true.

Like Enda Walsh's *The Walworth Farce* (and many other plays), this show is about the stories we tell ourselves to keep going. They don't have to be true to help, of course and Morgan means no harm. Fryman is excellent as Morgan and lets us know how much more satisfying this play might be with a stronger production. He makes the most of the monologue in Act One where Morgan tells Angus their "bedtime" story while sitting under the stars. And in Act Two he's even better when finally telling Angus the real story about what happened to them. Fryman has fun teasing the actor in their midst, pretending the cows live in terror of being eaten or ordering the kid to polish gravel before they throw it in a ditch. But his wry sense of humor doesn't disguise an innate seriousness or the emotional toll of the burden Morgan has carried all these years.

Laney has a difficult part as the slow, forgetful Angus. It's an awkward role but you can imagine it not feeling so awkward in other hands. It's telling that when he quotes a poem at the end, it comes across without any meaning or beauty. Weakest of all is Fast as that rather dim-witted actor. Miles sometimes seems even slower on the upkeep than Angus. His stagecraft isn't in the same league as Fryman; for example, when he's in the kitchen and Fryman is telling that hypnotic story, it takes a while

before we realize Miles can hear what's being said. Even after it's clear and he's standing by the door, eavesdropping, we have no sense of him following the story or being moved by its import.

Soho Playhouse is a tiny place but the set by Rebecca Lord-Surratt nonetheless feels ungainly. Alexander Dinelaris directs but you get the strong impression Fryman didn't need any while Fast and Laney could have used a lot more. Perhaps after 14 years Healey deserved even better. But despite the many flaws the appeal of the play -- and the talent of Fryman -- shine through.

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
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***

The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *

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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.*

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