



THE BLOG

Theater: Almost 'Paradise;' Awkward 'Affair'

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[THE GRAND PARADISE](#) *** out of ****

[OUR MOTHER'S BRIEF AFFAIR](#) * 1/2 out of ****

[THE GRAND PARADISE](#) *** out of ****

[THE GRAND PARADISE IN BROOKLYN](#)

Great art is usually immersive. If I open a novel by Charles Dickens, I can soon forget my surroundings entirely. A transporting album like *Pink Moon* by Nick Drake creates its own dusky, late night reality. Walk out of the cinema after seeing Kieslowski's *Red* and you'll blink in the sunlight, feeling shaken and spotting connections between yourself and strangers for the rest of the day. In theater, the immersive trend is surely the latest iteration of "site specific" and other spins on the classic "sit in your seat and watch a show" performance of drama. It's gone from novelty to tiresome trend to regular staple, a choice that is no more or less promising than any other.

Punchdrunk has set the standard, triumphing here in NYC with *Sleep No More* but achieving a string of notable works in London and around the world. Third Rail staked a claim to similar territory by resetting *Alice In Wonderland* in an insane asylum for *Then She Fell*. Now they're transporting people to the 1970s and a tropical resort a la *Fantasy Island*, a sexual paradise where visitors can be drawn out of their shells, transformed and return home a new person...assuming they return at all.

I missed *Then She Fell*, unfortunately. Highly praised, it's still running in New York City and is now joined by *The Grand Paradise*. This too is created by the threesome of Zach Morris, Tom Pearson & Jennine Willett, the artistic directors of the company who directed, designed, wrote and

choreographed it in collaboration with their company. They have rotating cast and "staff" and shows like this are designed to contain more plot and experiences than one person can see in one night.

A cursory description makes the show sound like a teasing, sexual romp, a bacchanal of bawdiness. The audience is "flown" to a resort and brought into a main area where they're given leis and welcomed by a smiling, attractive staff that moves in a dreamlike manner and feels vaguely cultish. That's not quite right, since the show notably does not try and exude danger or (too much) dislocation. Mixed in with the audience are some other tourists clutching luggage, mainly a family including a husband, wife, two daughters and the older daughter's boyfriend. They notably don't get leis so that seems a clue as to who is in the audience and who is performing, though the show will shift the rules as things go along.

Practically the moment their luggage is whisked away, the wife is beguiled by a female singer, climbing up to another level and changing clothes with this figure, assuming a new identity and leaving her family behind without a backward glance. (I kept peeking, but the husband didn't seem particularly surprised.) Numerous storylines spread out: the wife of course is eager to be transformed, the husband is confused and tempted and ultimately "baptized" into a new and purer version of himself and all the young people explore their sexuality, with their choices making a good argument for genetic predisposition.

The Grand Paradise contains various one-off scenes where groups from the audience or individuals are taken into private areas for palm readings, discussions of time, neck massages and the like. Meanwhile, the various explorations of the family and staff take place around us, with audience members frequently standing along the walls or peeking in around corners or through windows as characters fight, tease, flirt, dance and more. It sounds like a libidinous free for all, but wisely, it's not.



(photo by Joshua Reaver)

In ways large and small, *The Grand Paradise* explores sexual identity and the freedom of the 1970s without trying to be "naughty" or sexy-sexy. Voyeurism is not really the point, at least not in the sense of titillation. What the show is really going for is intimacy. To an unusual degree, the actors in the show touch, hold, dance with and otherwise make contact with the audience. They do it respectfully and never erotically (well, at least not with me; I can't speak for the younger, prettier audience members). The result is a sweet, rather innocent vibe that permeates the show and makes the more hippie-ish moments in private go down easily.

My guest followed the plot-line of the younger daughter (Kate Ladenheim), who is rather unwillingly tempted into various modes of seduction, finally claiming her own identity on the Kinsey scale leaning towards women. He was engaged by her performance, even as the story was broken up by scenes of the father, mother and other vignettes.

I stuck mostly to the story of the Boyfriend, played and danced beautifully by Jeff Sykes. As with *Sleep No More* and other similar shows, when I find an actor or storyline that intrigues me, I try to stick with it or come back to it when possible. I'm sure the cast dubs audience members like me "stalkers," though hopefully they find it a compliment for giving a good performance.

Most of the plot is told through dance, with virtually no dialogue used to push the main stories forward. And dance is unquestionably the show's strong suit. Sykes' character was consistently manhandled by the men and women around him in choreographed numbers, a young, confused person with the sense of being tugged this way and that by desire and interest embodied by a literal tug of war amongst the rest with him as the rope. The Boyfriend had a sweet scene of innocent romance with his

girlfriend, but their sexual experience wasn't remotely satisfying for either. (Maybe having a dozen people peeking in the windows of their bungalow didn't help.)

Soon he's tentatively looking at the staff, all of whom are looking back, far less tentatively. They toss him back and forth with abandon, with the boyfriend looking alternately confused, freaked out and excited by the attention. Women and men flirt, but it's clearly one staffer -- the Hustler-- that intrigued the most. The Hustler is played by Zach McNally with a 70s 'stache and a wicked gleam, the sort of person who breaks hearts and enjoys it. An arm wrestling match between the two turns into a fight, with the man slapping him on the ass when the Boyfriend tries to leave, confusing our hero even more.

Again and again, Sykes would register conflicting emotions. The Boyfriend grew from a shy person barely making eye contact with anyone to peeking at the staff (and audience members) to eventually getting bolder and bolder and registering our attention more directly. He didn't transform into a Lothario; he just discovered the power of acting on his desire to at least *look* at the person he wanted to look at. When a far more satisfying moment of physical pleasure loomed, the Boyfriend and the Hustler retreated to the bungalow and slowly closed the blinds, shutting out the prying eyes of the audience.

My guest tracked a different but similar sensibility in the Younger Sister's story. Sexual identity and the abandon of the seventies was the subject overall. But they never tried to create the obvious aura of freewheeling eroticism, just a sense of possibilities opening up and the genuine risks that entailed. This was not a drug-fueled odyssey. The evening worked and the dance numbers were the reason why. They subtly echoed the era's dance moves without becoming kitsch, propelling the story forward at most every turn.

What worked less well was the production design at the smaller, more detailed level. Punchdrunk raised the bar so high with *Sleep No More* that you simply can't get away with tossing in a few random objects and call it set dressing. The costumes and general atmosphere were effective (thanks especially to the score and effective sound design of Sean Hagerty, which worked well despite having to deal with leaking into varied rooms where different scenes were taking place.

Better to have no props at all than to toss some old photos here, some coins there and so on. If you see an old phone sitting on a shelf in a waiting area, one can't help being disappointed when there's no audio after you pick it up; why not glue it to the phone or have the cord dangle loose or even better create some interesting audio to play on a loop?

Short videos teasingly hidden behind a panel or two proved uninteresting when given a closer look. An open chest might have an old camera or other bric a brac in it, but so what? Certain rooms, like the one filled with hourglasses were more effective since they set a stage, but even there one might have been *overwhelmed* with hourglasses. Instead the shelves looked a little barer than one might hope for (though I did like the hourglass with sand dyed blue). It seemed a lack rather than a choice and the overall effect of these minor details was to make the experience seem less "real" than it would have if they'd had no open chest, no videos, and no phone at all.

Dance is clearly this company's strong suit, at least in this show. Self-contained scenes were less successful textually, but none were bad, a credit to the actors who delivered them. I really liked a simple but effective "light show" in which Jett (Mayte Natalio) played off our astrology signs to tell a story with a bottle of water, a bowl with metallic tiles and a small light. Natalio was a sexy but reserved presence, creating an intriguing distance throughout the night. And I certainly enjoyed my private pillow fight with the Hustler, who laughed when I suggested he had a good chance with the new kid. Even here, it would have been interesting to see them push their wordless storytelling even further; many of these experiences might have been more mysterious and effective without the monologues even the authors tried to downplay by suggesting it was pretty "New Age" stuff.

If I mention the nudity, you might again think naughty thoughts. While the actors are certainly beautiful, that's not what they accomplish. Cheap thrills are easy. Here the wife strips down to her underwear just to assume a new identity. The husband disrobes so he can dive into a pool and be reborn, donning all white clothes to symbolize his new purity. And the Boyfriend who is alone outside of a room, wants to do nothing more than knock on the door and say "hi." When he takes off his clothes, it feels like a natural expression of the vulnerability one feels in any new relationship. A lesser show would have had the object of desire abruptly come outside and see him or have yet another character stumble upon him for a scene of embarrassment or sexy surprise. But he is alone and remains alone. The Boyfriend slowly puts his clothes back on, having shown himself and us that he's ready to bare himself in every way. *The Grand Paradise* might have been a boring romp, an exercise in cheesy references or a parade of silly clothes. Instead, at its best, it shows that whatever era you're living in, moments of true intimacy are rare and precious and best appreciated quietly, one on one, with the curtains drawn.

[OUR MOTHER'S BRIEF AFFAIR](#) * 1/2 out of ****

MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE

If this were a better play, I'd start by talking about Richard Greenberg. His recent successes include Tony nominations for *The Assembled Parties* (which others liked more than I) and acclaim for the musical *Far From Heaven*. Yet still, we return again and again to naming first and foremost his unquestioned earlier triumphs with *Take Me Out* and *Eastern Standard*. That order of importance is not going to change with the addition of *Our Mother's Brief Affair*.

And so we start with Linda Lavin, a terrific stage actress with a Tony and a clutch of nominations for roles in everything from Neil Simon's *Broadway Bound* to *The Tale Of The Allergist's Wife*. Her dance card on the stage, TV and film is always full but still I feel like she deserves more if only because she's so good. (And while *Alice* made her fortune, I still wish she stuck with *Barney Miller*; it never recovered from losing her.)

Any energy, any snap to be found comes from Lavin. She plays Anna, a demanding mother who is slowly dying and now, finally, shares some intimate details of her life with her two children. To confess? To prove her life meant something? To entertain a mind drifting in and out of sanity by making up a tale of infidelity? We'll never know.

What we do know is that intimate details are something almost no child wants to hear. Yet her son Seth (the appealing Greg Keller) and daughter Abby (Kate Arrington) can't help themselves. Abby hates labels but apparently both she and her brother are gay; this being a New York mother, that's not as big an issue as which one will pay her enough attention. So out comes the story of her brief but notable affair with Abe (played by John Procaccino). Mom also has a secret, a burden she's never told anyone and never will (though of course, she will).

It's all delivered in such familiar detail, from the forced music lessons for the Jewish boy to the lover who is so different from her husband to the sitcom-zippy humor that you wonder what if anything of interest could be on tap. Then Greenberg drops his bombshell, an end of act one revelation as to the identity of her lover; the show never recovers, not that there was much to recover from.

Rather amusingly, Greenberg has to immediately explain who this once infamous historical figure is: for Jews of a certain age, the betrayer of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (namely, her brother David Greenglass) is a name of infamy, as hated and notorious as Jack the Ripper. The show literally screeches to a halt to the sound of a needle scratching an LP when the two children step out towards the apron of the stage and in a witty aside, explain to everyone under 50 exactly who David Greenglass is and why we should care. They explain how his testimony sent them to the electric chair, which unfortunately needs the additional historical note that in fact we now know Julius was indeed guilty of the crime charged, a caveat that undercuts the righteousness a tad. Still, for most American Jews of Anna's era, Greenglass would be a figure of hate, a man assumed to be weighed down by the guilt of betraying those two to save his own skin (and that of his wife). He was spat upon, despised and eventually moved and changed his name, always expecting to be rejected whenever he revealed his true identity. This aside is the liveliest five minutes of the show and nothing before or after feels as fresh as that footnote.

Oddly, Greenberg explains exactly who Greenglass is and why he would be dripping with self-loathing and shame. And yet, the actual character he wrote seems pretty indifferent, telling Lavin's Anna what he did and why and not sounding particularly burdened, truth be told. He certainly doesn't feel like an historical figure of even minor note and his need for forgiveness doesn't feel bone deep. It's as if you tossed in Elie Wiesel and then couldn't really have him express any insight into the Holocaust.

Maybe this is because Anna never actually met the real Greenglass? After all, the show toys with the idea that she has dementia and is making it all up or at least the part about who he was. The problem is that we don't care one way or another. Anna has her own shame and one she divulges in a monologue that's muddled and confusing, even if we can tacitly recognize why she'd feel bad about her brief thoughtless action long ago. The fact that her betrayal pales in comparison to what he did simply muddies the waters even more.

In a show this diffuse, this uncertain as to what it wants to say, everything remains fuzzy, from the direction of Lyne Meadow to the lighting and

costumes. The actors never exactly stumbled or dried up on their lines, but even seeing it after the show had opened, they felt tentative. When the story doesn't ring true, it can be awfully hard to remember your lines and even harder to bring them to life.

This extends to all the tech elements, especially Santo Loquasto's indifferent set design. Tall panels sort of seem to break the stage up into three sections from front to back, with the section nearest the audience playing the role of park bench or home or hospital room. Lavin would be standing on one side but then slump into a chair, which somehow was meant to double as her hospital bed. None of it left any impression. Why there were two other sections and what they were meant for, I don't know.

Tossing in such a loaded figure as Greenglass into a domestic drama tilts the play out of whack, whether Greenglass was ever there in the first place or not. Procaccino is vague from start to finish, no surprise given his character's uncertain nature, while Arrington's daughter feels equally indistinct. Keller benefits from having the most time onstage with Lavin, but even there it's the actor's winning personality that anchors us rather than anything about this particular role.

Even Lavin is not enough in these circumstances. She jumps decades in age with ease. She delivers modest jokes with vinegar and topspin to give them the semblance of life. She commands the stage. But an artist needs material to work with and here she has precious little.

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

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CONVERSATIONS