

Theater: Apple Core; Acting Galore

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REGULAR SINGING ** out of ****
AND AWAY WE GO ** out of ****

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PUBLIC THEATER

Going to visit your relatives during the holidays can be exhausting and exasperating. But oddly enough going to visit a friend's family during the holidays can be entertaining and amusing. They don't push your buttons, you don't have the same shared history and you know in the back of your mind that you never have to be around them again unless you decide you want to. Your friend goes slowly crazy while you smile and charm everyone around you.

So the fourth and final return to the Apple family should be a breeze. They've been gathering on notable occasions for several years now in the plays by Richard Nelson: the mid-term elections of 2010, the tenth anniversary of 9-11, the 2012 election day and now the 50th anniversary of the assassination of JFK. And yet. Perhaps it's a credit to the actors and the writing, but the Apple family has become real to a degree and I head to their gatherings with a certain reluctance. They are tiresomely liberal and acknowledge it just enough to -- in their minds -- excuse their blinkered outlook on the world and their own behavior. The three sisters make me feel almost misogynistic with their slow chipping away at the men around them, their suffering in silence which is anything but, their quicksand-like ability to pull you under the more you struggle. My goodness, one of them is the mother of a child that committed suicide and I rarely feel any sympathy for her!

Above all, there is Barbara (very well acted by Maryann Plunkett), a woman who annoyingly repeats the sentences of aging Uncle Benjamin (a wonderful Jon DeVries). If Uncle Benjamin says, "I'm tired," she'll immediately announce, "He's tired." It's a good joke until Nelson typically beats it into the ground by repeating it about eight or so times. Barbara wears down poor beleaguered Richard (Jay O. Sanders, great as always), wearing down his resistance to staying longer by constant requests like the dripping of water on a stone. Richard is beset on all sides: when his sister Jane (Sally Murphy) visits him in Albany, she tells the others he seems to have no friends and when Richard explains he merely wanted to spend his time with her. I'm going to go, he tries to say for the hundredth time as the family sits around while the ex-husband of Marian (Laila Robins) is slowly dying upstairs. "Don't go yet," says Barbara, but of course "yet" means "ever." Don't ever go. Marian has a failed marriage and a dead daughter. Jane has a would-be actor for a husband she's dragged to Rhinebeck while insisting he shouldn't give up on his dream of acting. Jane is also a failed writer, if you can fail at something you rarely ever start and never finish. Barbara is a teacher and insists nobly that a life devoted to others is not a life wasted and perhaps kids herself in insisting that her students are thrilled when Uncle Benjamin comes to talk to the class. In a rare moment of insight, she also recognizes that one of the perks of being a teacher is that people are forced to answer your questions.

In short, these people are exhausting. After three plays, I'm not quite sure what attitude Nelson has towards them. I can imagine these plays being done in a scathing style that mocks the pretensions and assumed worldview of these people, but satire seems far from his mind.

Regular Singing in fact ends with the characters turning to the audience for the first time in this quartet of plays and sharing how this is how we live, this is how we come together at times of great import to bond and grieve and celebrate and remember. If he means these plays to embody our national coming together at moments of crisis, I fear the major events are reduced to a trivial backdrop with the mundane concerns of everyday not putting those events in sharp relief but simply turning them into a backdrop for a banal exchange of information: how are the kids, how's your job, who is divorced now, who has moved away and so on. It neither informs the larger issues at hand nor deepens our appreciation for "real" life, the lives that don't make headlines.

I mentioned misogyny earlier because it's worth noting how vastly improved the plays are when the men take center stage. All the actors are uniformly strong (they certainly aren't the problem here) but when Sanders is talking, you sit up and notice. He seems reasonable and his concerns, his comments actually seem rooted in what's going on, not the malicious or soul-deadening or self-absorbed observations that are invariably the domain of the women depicted here.

Similarly, Uncle Benjamin is a welcome voice as well, especially as embodied with autumnal grace by DeVries. Nelson uses the old trick of having Uncle Benjamin reading from other works, like Chekhov, so you're already a leg up there when it comes to the material. In contrast, when they're reading a news account of the Kennedy assassination, Barbara interrupts literally every line of what she considers a brilliant piece with pedantic commentary until you want to tell her to for the love of God be quiet and let the piece be read. Nelson doesn't seem to think her interruptions annoying though a different staging might have milked laughs by having the reader or other family members grow increasingly frustrated by her thinking this is a teaching moment. Uncle Benjamin usually seems the wisest person around, heading off stage for a cigarette on the back porch or sitting in a corner reading the letters of Jane Austen, ignoring everything that's going on around him.

Perhaps the effect of these plays would be changed by seeing them in one week, rather than over three years. But I doubt it; if anything their repetitive nature and lack of growth would be emphasized. I seem to be in the distinct minority when finding this family tiresome. But for me, spending a night much less a week with the Apples would make me long for that blessed bus or train or plane ride back home, with home being the place where you're with your friends and not, I fear, your family.

AND AWAY WE GO ** out of **** **PEARL THEATRE**

I've fallen in love with the Pearl Theatre Company in the last year or so as they've settled into their new home on 42nd Street on the (far) west side. What better way to celebrate their 30th year than with a new play by Terrence McNally, especially a play that celebrates acting and acting troupes throughout history?

The set is a jumble room of a backstage, with props from all eras of history hanging from the rafters. One gets it immediately -- this is the Platonic ideal of a backstage setting or the backstage that might be if all of theater history had taken place here. It's also a bit vague; one feels it might just as easily be a workroom or a messy basement of a junk store. Still, it's fine as far as it goes though ultimately it feels more generic than universal.

It begins charmingly with each of the six actors stepping forward, kneeling down and kissing the stage and then stating their name, how long they've been with the company and their personal favorite and least favorite roles. One and all, their comments are amusing and charming. And away we go, first to ancient Greece where actors are about to launch a performance of *The Oresteia* and then back and forth in time: the Burbages in England are about to do *The Tempest*, Versailles, Moscow for a reading of *The Seagull*, the Coconut Grove Playhouse in Miami where *Waiting For Godot* has been greeted with dismal disgust in 1956 and today where a theater company is struggling to survive financially.

Oh, the possibilities. The cast is strong throughout, with the exception of Micah Stock, who tackles his many roles and suspect accents with the spirit of a *Saturday Night Live* sketch. It's not necessarily a bad idea since the scene changes begin to blur and ultimately it all feels like nonsense. But the others at times find moments of grace: the pause when those Greek actors realize an elderly talent is struggling with his lines and may be at the end of his career sticks in the mind, for example. Sean McNally is always a welcome presence and is matched by the others in the ensemble.

But many problems abound. First and foremost, the play has no direction. When you can skip back and forth in time with no rhyme or reason, it becomes exhausting. The audience simply has no way to know where we're going or when we'll get there. Some sort of spine is needed to keep us anchored. There's a suggestion the play might circumspectly show the changing role of women in the theater, from banned to benefactor.

One might also have easily developed a through-line, by starting with the reading of a play to rehearsals to opening night to the company facing a financial shutdown to after hours when romance or at least passion blossoms. It wouldn't matter that the reading took place in Moscow in 1896 or the rehearsal in ancient Greece and the intermission in London. We'd feel the forward momentum by following the process of a play and know where we were. Instead, the play and the audience is rootless; it might have ended in half an hour or gone on for another two and it would be hard to tell the difference.

Instead we just ping back and forth with no rhyme or reason. It doesn't help that

director Jack Cummings III doesn't give us any clear indication when we've jumped time frames. Sometimes there's a distant rumble, other times there's a subtle lighting change or a sound effect of more notable character. And yet other times, I don't believe there was any signal of any sort. Does it matter? Absolutely. One shouldn't have to spend every minute trying to nail down what era we're in, especially when the slippery accents won't make it abundantly clear. Very few other clues are available (such as costumes or set) so some sort of device should guide our way.

I can understand the director's confusion, since McNally doesn't follow his own rules. Soon people of different eras are criss-crossing paths with abandon and the audience must simply give up and wait for the end, gleaning what pleasure they can from a fine cast doing their best with a shapeless, sloppy valentine to their craft and their world.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

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 ***
Bunnicula: 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 *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **

Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *
Women Or Nothing ** 1/2
Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play * 1/2
You Never Can Tell ***
Romeo And Juliet *
Arguendo **
August Wilson's American Century Cycle ****
The Glass Menagerie ** 1/2
Lady Day * 1/2
Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse ****
Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical ** 1/2
Bronx Bombers * 1/2
Romeo & Juliet at CSC * 1/2
A Night With Janis Joplin **
The Winslow Boy ***
Juno And The Paycock **
How I Learned To Drive **
Fun Home **
Two Boys at the Met **
Big Fish **
A Time To Kill * 1/2
Year Of The Rooster ***
The Snow Geese ** 1/2
A Midsummer Night's Dream ** 1/2
The Lady in Red Converses With Diablo ** 1/2
After Midnight ***
La Soiree ***
Nothing To Hide ** 1/2
The Patron Saint Of Sea Monsters **
Die Frau Ohne Schatten/The Woman Without A Shadow at the Met
Little Miss Sunshine **
Souvenir ** 1/2
A Gentleman's Guide To Love & Murder *** 1/2
Twelfth Night *** 1/2
King Richard The Third ***
Lies My Father Told Me **
Regular Singing **
And Away We Go **

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