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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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BARYSHNIKOV ARTS CENTRE

STANDING ON CEREMONY: THE GAY MARRIAGE PLAYS ** out of ****
MINETTA LANE THEATRE

Samuel Beckett sees the absurdity of existence, true. But too often productions of his work don't catch the humor in that absurdity. It's there however and the best Beckett -- whether it's Fiona Shaw buried up to her neck in *Happy Days* or this collection of five short works -- is shot through with humor. They're not easy laughs, but they're there. This one hour show demonstrates that

nicely and it feels completely satisfying at this intense but brief length. Peter Brook and Marie-Helene Estienne direct with precision and the uncredited costumes and sets are ideal, with equally good lighting by Philippe Vialatte. Kathryn Hunter is first among equals in the three performers, but they all get a chance to shine.

Rough For Theatre I features Jos Houben and Marcello Magni as two men trapped in a desolate landscape, one missing a leg and the other missing his sight. They banter and argue and warily circle each other, wondering if they can find some sort of safe companionship with this stranger. Houben and Magni have their moments but this feels the least realized of the works shown here and it doesn't earn the hoped-for shocking final image.

Rockaby is the highlight of the night with Olivier winner Hunter outstanding as the woman delivering a mournful monologue. Hunter's voice is so mesmerizing you are tempted to avert your eyes and just listen to it, though that would deprive you of appreciating her complete control of her body and the stage as well as the final reckoning where the woman is in a chair rocking back and forth as the lights slowly dim (forever, one imagines). I remember her *Richard III* at Shakespeare's Globe as a remarkably physically demanding role and so intriguing I wanted to see her again. It was worth the wait.

Act Without Words is a crowd pleaser. The two men are onstage enclosed in white bags. Unexpectedly, a pointer lowers from the ceiling -- it looks like a missile or maybe the finger of an accusing god -- and prods one bag, waking the man up. He gets up, climbs out of the bag and goes through his daily routine in a funk, hissing with displeasure every time life throws him a curveball. The joke is that he goes back into the bag and the other man is woken. He goes through the same routine with a look of undiluted joy on his face; everything that frustrated the first man provides endless delight to him. It's a simple joke but Houben and Magni deliver it to perfection.

Neither is an even briefer monologue that almost feels like a companion piece to the first. Hunter's voice remained a pleasure and I was certain the piece was headed somewhere. But it ended before I could even get my bearings.

Come and Go is another delight with all three actors sitting on a park bench dressed as little old ladies (the costumes are amusing but not silly or mocking). One by one, each of the ladies gets up and steps aside, giving the other two an opportunity to gossip mercilessly. They causally rearrange their positions on the bench until at one point they get laughs just by being arranged on the bench in order of height. Hunter is towered over by the other two and contorts her face hilariously. All three are in sync and end the show beautifully. A witty, amusing night of Beckett? The best productions usually are.

Standing On Ceremony doesn't shy away from easy laughs and why should it? The playwrights involved are all in a good mood as gay Americans see their marriages legally recognized by more and more states. Why not have a laugh and celebrate? Everyone goes to weddings and feels free to criticize the flowers or lighting or music or food or what-have-you. So one can wish everyone well and celebrate expanding rights for all Americans and yet still point out that these plays are by and large quick ditties that soon fade from memory and that the production is a glorified reading, with actors lined up on stage at podiums and more often than not glancing at the scripts in front of them. It's an amiable afternoon with talented people and nothing more.

The performance I caught did not include the piece by Joe Keenan (more's the pity since I love his novels and TV work). But all the rest are fairly of a piece -- silly, light and not terribly memorable. The cast is amiable too, with Harriet Harris stealing the show but everyone from Craig Bierko and Richard Thomas to Beth Leavel and Polly Draper to Mark Consuelos having a good line or affecting moment here and there.

"The Revision" by Jordan Harrison is a quickie joke about rewriting vows to reflect the reality of life (substituting "domestic partner or civil union" for "lawfully wedded," for example. You can see where it's

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going and it goes there. "This Flight Tonight" by Wendy MacLeod has two women leaving for their wedding in middle America and expressing their nervousness before reaffirming their love. "On Facebook" is a clever conceit by Doug Wright, who used the thread of an online argument about gay marriage to create his work, though unfortunately it's not lengthy or vivid enough to do more than document, as opposed to dramatize.

"Strange Fruit" is Neil LaBute's effort and you won't be surprised that he reminds us that just because the marriages of gays and lesbians might be legally recognized in some states doesn't mean that gay bashing and other forms of hatred have suddenly disappeared. LaBute is like the guest at a wedding talking about a friend's bitter divorce, though Bierko and Consuelos give the drama depth. "Traditional Wedding" by Mo Gaffney shows two women getting married with one of them desperate to make sure they don't do anything by the books because she wants to avoid cliché. "Pablo & Andrew At The Altar Of Words" is a weak finale by Jose Rivera with two men exchanging their super sweet vows, which brings the evening full circle back to where it began and lets them toss bouquets into the audience.

That leaves two plays by Paul Rudnick and one by Moises Kaufman. "London Mosquitoes" by Kaufman features Richard Thomas giving a eulogy for his partner of 46 years, a prickly fellow apparently who was always smart and usually right. Thomas does well by the monologue and it does contain a very sweet and romantic explanation for why the lover did NOT want to get married after it was legal for them to do so. For me, the piece was too much of a greatest hits package, including 9-11, AIDS, gay marriage and a few other social landmarks I've probably forgotten. But I'd be remiss if I didn't mention the exceptional reaction it received from the audience, which was in a very warm mood throughout.

But Rudnick is last because he's always funniest. His pieces in The New Yorker are so hilarious you always want to pick up the phone and tell him so. Now he can just go to the theater and watch audiences howl over his work, both of which feature Harriet Harris. In "My Husband," she berates her gay son (Consuelos) for not being married and parades in front of him the many examples of her friends whose sons are MUCH gayer than he is. How can she compete? It ends on an absurdist, unsatisfying note that doesn't quite land but for a while it's very funny indeed. Even better is Rudnick's "The Gay Agenda," in which Harris plays a housewife who gives a speech about trying to understand gay people but warning us about the gay agenda and no, they can't have marriage because they already have everything else and they should leave something for her. It grows increasingly hysterical and Harris increasingly funny, though she gets laughs the moment she steps up to the microphone.

If laughter is the best revenge, Harris is getting sweet revenge indeed. These playlets may do the same. They aren't designed to last forever, just to bring together audiences and actors and celebrate a happy moment. And if that's the only goal, they have our blessing. But like a real marriage you wonder, will this one endure in 30 years through revivals? Probably not. But hey, straight marriages fail just as often.

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