

Theater: Debra Messing's Broadway Debut -- How'd She Do?

Theater: Debra Messing's Broadway Debut -- How'd She Do?

OUTSIDE MULLINGAR *** out of ****
MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB

I've often wished Emmy winner Debra Messing had been born in the era of screwball comedies so Hollywood would know what to do with her many talents. Now, with her promising Broadway debut, I might also wish she'd worked her way up through the theater instead of TV. Well, she'll just have to settle for fame and fortune via *Will & Grace* (and *The Starter Wife* and *Smash*). And we'll have to settle for her better late than never appearance on the Great White Way in a rock solid play by John Patrick Shanley that is his most crowd-pleasing work since the movie *Moonstruck* and probably his best play outside of *Doubt*.

The *Moonstruck* reference is easy since the play has been sold as a romantic drama with Messing and Tony winner Brian F. O'Byrne (*Doubt*, *The Coast Of Utopia*) as next door neighbors who are fated for each other, give or take a decade or two (not to mention some serious quirks). But that comparison puts a misleading gloss on a piece that will surely look even better in years to come as future productions tease out its many layers.

Perhaps the greatest strength of *Outside Mullingar* is how constantly surprised we are by the inevitable in this story set "recently" in the midlands of Ireland. Anthony (O'Byrne) and his father Tony (the wonderful Peter Maloney) come home to their farm after the funeral of their next-door neighbor. Anthony is straightening up because he's invited the widow (Dearbhla Molloy, pitch perfect) and daughter Rosemary (Messing) over for a cup. It's the first of six deceptively simple scenes taking place over a few years.

Anthony is astonished to hear his father doesn't plan to leave the farm to him, even though Anthony has bled for the place and has nothing to show for it other than a broken heart from his teenage years and the bleak future of a lonely bachelor existence. He's fine with that, but to not get the farm? Even though he's always felt it to be a millstone around his neck? Unthinkable. The two families spar with the ease of old acquaintances, both elderly folk readily admitting they're not long for this world and both young (okay, middle-aged) children insisting they're fine with their limited prospects.

It's clear Tony should leave the farm to his son. It's clear Anthony and Rosemary are...well, not made for each other. They're too ornery and set in their ways and just plain odd for all that. But they're certainly not made for anyone else, not as far as they're both secretly concerned. And it just makes sense, them two together. Maybe. Two obstacles remain: one of them a disputed bit of land and the other a Secret of Anthony's. Happily, *Outside Mullingar* keeps that Secret just a modest secret, so it doesn't build up anticipation for a truly offbeat revelation that takes an actor of O'Byrne's immense skill to put over.

As the two parental figures, Maloney and Molloy are very good. Molloy especially might have been forgiven for pumping up her part by stealing more laughs than necessary. But she is wisely content to let her presence remain exactly as it should. Indeed, the play is filled with humor, though only the final scene has the romantic loopiness of *Moonstruck*. The first few scenes have more substance, more drama, than one might expect and Tony's deathbed confession is quietly moving.

Playing the two lonely souls so set in their ways they are in danger of remaining so forever, O'Byrne and

Messing have wonderful chemistry. Messing's accent is the sole shaky aspect, though not damagingly so. She has the comic chops to sell her frumpy, determined character and the confidence of a pro not to oversell it. O'Byrne centers the show on his capable, quiet shoulders, carrying the burden with ease. All credit to director Doug Hughes for molding them into a fine ensemble.

But Hughes must also take the blame for a physical production that lets the actors -- and Shanley's play -- down. Perhaps the great John Lee Beatty was given too much money? His production design is bizarrely over-complicated when one can easily envision how the play could be done in one set. That would in fact reinforce the essential sturdiness of the work. Instead the kitchen and living area of the first scene rotates out and away to make room for an ugly outdoor scene. It features a timid sliver of a barn roof filled with hay and a mechanical downpour of rain that has such symmetrical drops of water evenly spaced apart across the stage that it looks more like the beginnings of a Busby Berkeley number than an Irish downpour.

A later scene in the neighbor's kitchen is so identical to the first you wonder why they bothered. And though the play is filled with a love of the land, we get no sense of the outdoors whatsoever. (One might also fault the lighting of Mark McCullough but since he has nothing of note outdoors to light this seems churlish. In contrast, the costumes of Catherine Zuber and the wig and hair designs of Tom Watson are fine.) While the sound design of Fitz Patton does its job unobtrusively (as it should), his modest score feels distractingly chirpy in between some scenes (as if reassuring the audience that more romantic moments are ahead) and just plain bland when the audience is exiting.

The only touch that justifies the expense is seeing the deathbed of Tony slip backwards into the darkness. But unquestionably the play would have a stronger sense of space and just feel more rooted if it took place on essentially one set, a very easy fix and one that will surely benefit the show when it is performed regionally. And performed it will be. Despite a less than ideal physical presentation, this is a very well-acted production of a quietly ambitious work. It deserves to be a hit and will surely have a long life ahead of it across the country and across the pond. And if a funny, moving, sweet and romantic charmer like this with a big-name (and talented) TV star can't draw the audience it deserves, god help the future of original plays on Broadway.

THEATER OF 2014

[Beautiful: The Carole King Musical](#) ***

[Rodney King](#) ***

[Hard Times](#) ** 1/2

[Rosencrantz And Guildenstern Are Dead](#) **

[I Could Say More](#) *

[The Loneliness Of The Long Distance Runner](#) **

[Machinal](#) ***

[Outside Mullingar](#) ***