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ENTERTAINMENT

Theater: Does Orlando Bloom or Wilt on Broadway? Plus Nude Legal Wrangling And August Wilson

Posted: 09/26/2013 4:39 pm

ROMEO AND JULIET *

ARGUENDO **

AUGUST WILSON'S AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE ****

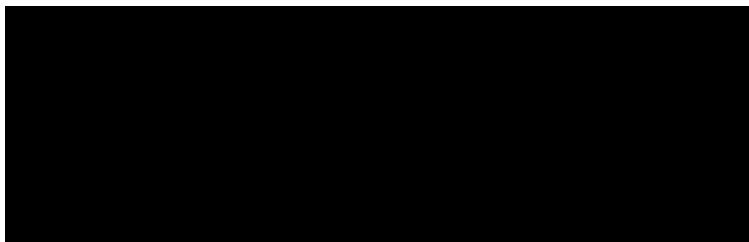
ROMEO AND JULIET *

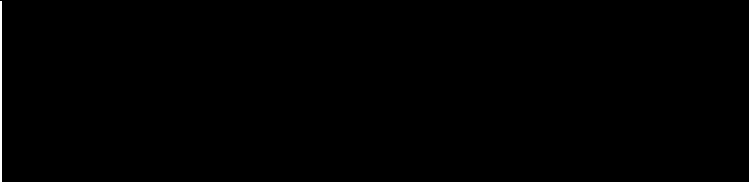
RICHARD RODGERS THEATRE

How is he? That's the question people have when a movie star like Orlando Bloom makes his Broadway debut in a Shakespearean play. Well, he's fine, grading on a curve. Bloom clearly set out to speak his lines loudly and clearly and that he does. (It's more than can be said of some others on stage with him.) Like many beginners with Shakespeare, he makes the mistake of hitting the rhymes too strongly, placing the poetry ahead of the prose and thus making it harder to understand the sense of what he's saying. But he gets better as the show goes on and acquits himself decently. *Romeo and Juliet* is one of Shakespeare's weaker plays but it's also very popular and easy to play on a simple level. Romeo is young and handsome and desperately in love. That he can do.

The shock for theatergoers is that the exceptionally talented Condola Rashad is in many ways weaker tackling her first Shakespearean part on Broadway. Rashad has been nominated twice for a Tony award and been terrific in everything she's done: the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Ruined*, the Tony-winning *The Trip To Bountiful*, *Stick Fly* and more. Here, she often rushes her lines and doesn't always make sense of them or even speak them clearly. Rashad has some good physical business in the balcony scene but by and large makes a poor impression. If this was the first time you saw her, other than her attractiveness, you might wonder what all the fuss was about.

This is the difference. Bloom (wisely) is trying to get through the evening with his dignity intact. Rashad is working to master Shakespeare, create a real living and breathing character and do the groundwork necessary so she'll get better and better at Shakespeare for years to come. Bloom may never appear on stage in Shakespeare (or anything else for that matter) ever again. Rashad may have success in TV and movies but theater is her home. She aims much higher and falls flatter, but in a weird way, it's a good sign for her future as an artist.





It doesn't help either of them that the production of *Romeo and Juliet* is poorly designed and poorly directed by David Leveaux. The story of course concerns two warring families. Their children fall madly in love but literally everything has conspired against their happiness. A mad plot to win the sympathy of their families involves Juliet faking her death so the two can be resurrected in triumph and welcomed home. For want of a cell phone, Romeo doesn't get the details of the plot and thinks she really has died. So he kills himself, she wakes up and then kills herself for real and everyone is sad.

The rather banal setting here is vaguely modern with Romeo walking around in ripped jeans and making his appearance on stage via the eye-rolling stunt of a motorcycle. The costumes by Fabio Toblini are obvious, with minor servants and citizens in especially unflattering garb.

The scenic design by Jesse Poleshuck is even worse. The nicely spare stage is dominated by a large graffiti covered wall in several pieces. It ably moves about and reconfigures itself to create rooms, doorways, walls for lovers to surmount and so on. Fine. But the stage is dominated by a portentous bell rung twice (once for Mercutio's death and again at the end). It's an overbearing symbol for the gloominess of the play. Juliet's bedroom features a bed and rather bizarrely a stand on the floor with a large globe of the world. Um, why? It's practically the only item on stage so surely it should have some meaning or be used in some inventive way. The balcony Juliet walks out on is also rather strangely low to the ground and quite lengthy. It's more like a patio deck than a balcony.

Matters aren't helped by Leveaux. The two lovers share a good bit when their first kiss is amusingly played for laughs as it goes on and on. But why does he have the balcony so low? Juliet is staring literally right at Romeo and saying, "Is that him?" Instead of putting him under the balcony (there's certainly room), for much of the time he's standing on a bare stage in plain sight, with not even a bush to give us reason to understand why she can't see him. Is she near-sighted?

Even worse is their first meeting at a party. The lame festivities are created by a few balloons and some unnecessary fire effects that reappear haplessly throughout the show. You can stage that "love at first sight" moment in many ways. But surely one of the worst has to involve putting Juliet way in the back (upstage right) so we can barely see her through the crowd and then having Romeo close to the audience...with his back to us, thus ensuring we can't see either of them clearly at this key moment.

The other actors do what they can. Christian Camargo did a very good Hamlet a few years ago but here he's so desperate to liven things up that the normally scene-stealing part of Mercutio is a bust. He thrusts his hips so often that Camargo is literally mounting the text (not to mention his fellow actors). He reaches for his zipper so often in a motion threatening to pull out his penis that you get bored and think he should either do it already or go home. Jayne Houdyshell keeps her dignity as the Nurse and Justin Guarini is still looking for the right part in the right show, but at least does no harm as Paris. For me, only the excellent Chuck Cooper did justice to his talent. As Juliet's father, the scene where he upbraids his daughter and puts his wife and nurse into their place was filled with humor and anger and an actual character we knew and understood. It was an all too brief reminder of the pleasure that can be had from even a lesser Shakespeare play.

ARGUENDO **

ELEVATOR REPAIR SERVICE AT PUBLIC THEATER

Elevator Repair Service is one of the more intriguing and successful theater companies of

the past few years. They specialize in using pre-existing text with unexpected flair. Their *Gatz* (a performance of the entire novel *The Great Gatsby*) was a sensation and their crowning achievement to date. They've also tackled other novels (*The Sound and the Fury* and *The Sun Also Rises*) to interesting if lesser effect.

Now they've moved onto trials. *Arguendo* uses court transcripts to reenact arguments before the Supreme Court in 1991 about whether a state could outlaw some forms of public nudity (such as dancing in strip clubs) while allowing it in others (such as in opera or theater). This is familiar territory for theater-goers who have seen court documents turned into riveting drama, as in *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials Of Oscar Wilde*.

If you follow the Supreme Court at all, this project will be even more enticing. After years of reading the coverage of Linda Greenhouse at the *New York Times*, reading full opinions online and now even getting a chance to hear audio recordings from the Court's history, it's no surprise that the personalities of the Justices and the drama of these cases come through in vivid style.

Unfortunately, ERS seemed not to quite trust the drama inherent in bringing these cases and the personalities of the Court to life. They gin up the action in various unnecessary ways. The capable five actors directed by John Collins begin with a pointless scene on the courthouse steps. It sets up the case and introduces one of the dancers affected by the ban on nude dancing. But since we don't get to know her better or follow her story it feels like a waste of time. It's also awkwardly acted in a sketch comedy sort of manner.

The heart of the piece are the oral arguments. Again, the five actors play most of the Justices plus the two lawyers making their case before the court. The drama arises from a lawyer stumbling over a word, feeling cornered by a line of questioning or grasping in relief at a lifeline thrown by another Justice to get them back on track. Certainly the playful staging at first makes sense, with Justices rolling around on chairs, sometimes circling a lawyer, sometimes wheeling away in boredom and so on. But too often the bouncing about didn't feel strictly motivated by the scene at hand and felt like something random to do while the legal arguments were laid out. And why are two Justices flirting?

As the arguments proceeded, the surrounding antics of the staging grew more and more frenzied as if they worried that even an 80 minute play might tax your patience if "all" it did was lay out legal arguments. It climaxed with a desperate bit of fireworks (including ever more frantic graphics displaying snippets of documents) and the perhaps inevitable onstage nudity by one of the lawyers to make an ironic point obvious. (Nudity in a stage play about this case is legal but full nudity at a strip club is not, at least in one state when this case was being heard.) The nudity wasn't bold or unexpected; if they felt the need to disrobe surely it could have been done more inventively. Perhaps they would all slowly get undressed until their nudity became banal and we focused again on the arguments at hand, subtly showing us it was all nonsense over such a silly issue anyway.

As a final scene, we see Justice Rehnquist (Chief Justice! he would bark out) in his new robes inspired by Gilbert & Sullivan while Ruth Bader Ginsberg discusses the collars she and Sandra Day O'Connor use on their robes. It's an odd, dramatically effective scene but other than a last-ditch effort to bring these people to life, it seems unnecessary.

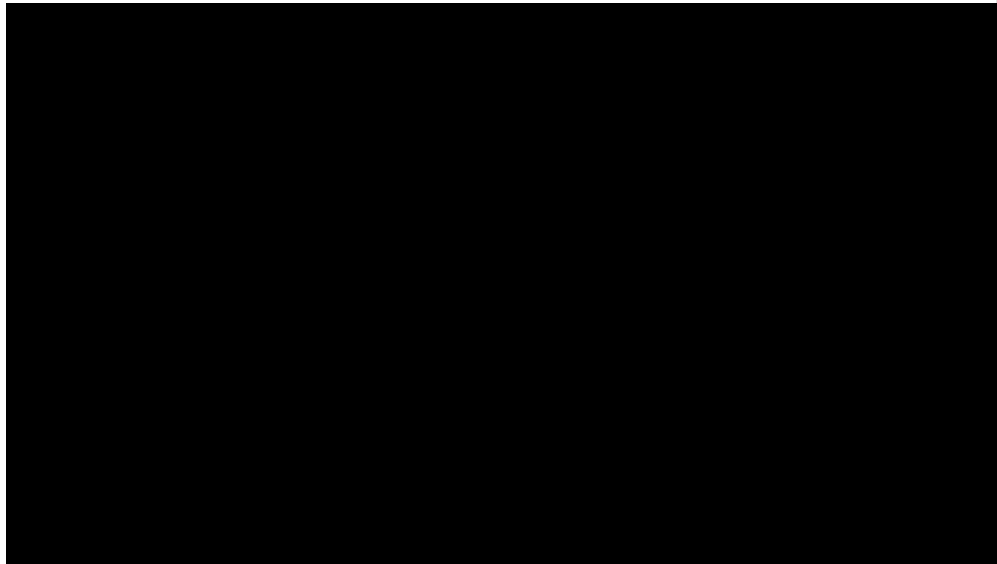
Maybe they should have cast a wider net. Surely there are countless public documents to draw upon, including interviews with the dancers and club owners to tell a fuller story about this case and its impact. That would be a very different play. But I believe a much better one could be crafted strictly out of oral arguments if they were more rigorous in their staging and trusted the inherent drama in the proceedings. I don't think ERS truly believed the clash of ideas was enough and so we can't either.

AUGUST WILSON'S AMERICAN CENTURY CYCLE ** THE GREENE SPACE AT WNYC/WQXR**

An epic achievement is winding up at the Greene Space, a performing venue at WNYC and WQXR. Working with the August Wilson estate, they are doing readings of all ten plays in Wilson's landmark work dubbed "The American Century Cycle." It contains one play for

every decade of the 20th century, mostly set around one neighborhood in Pittsburgh. You can watch the performances live online as they happen (the final one is *Radio Golf* this Saturday) but this recording with all-star casts is just the beginning. They'll be broadcast on the radio in 2014, the performances will be available online and on demand for months afterwards and at learning institutions for posterity. Hopefully, the recordings will also be made commercially available at some point as well.

Best of all, it's just the latest chapter in the growth of Wilson's stature as a major playwright. His work is performed all over the world of course. And just as Shakespeare's History Plays are performed with a large company doing them in repertory, some day soon we'll see the entire cycle tackled onstage by an ensemble, letting the world see this body of work as a whole for the first time. Before that happens, the Artistic Director of this series -- Ruben Santiago-Hudson -- is determined to see *Jitney* make it to Broadway. It's the only one in the cycle that hasn't been performed there yet (it did have a tremendously successful Off Broadway revival.)



When it does, Associate Artistic Director Stephen McKinley Henderson will surely snap up a Tony Award. He was so good (as always) with his hilarious, truthful work in the reading I attended, I can't wait to see him do it again in a fully staged production. I saw three plays and that reading of *Jitney* was certainly a highlight. I also attended readings of the two plays I hadn't seen before -- *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* and *Gem Of The Ocean* (with a terrific Phylicia Rashad probably even better now than she was on Broadway as Aunt Ester). Seeing these performances reinforced the obvious for me: Wilson's work is funny, harrowing and addictive. The more often you see his plays, the more you want to see them again. Soon. And there's a reason it's not called the "African American Century Cycle." By telling these specific stories, he is indeed keeping alive the African American journey from slavery to freedom. But like all great art, Wilson's plays speak to us all.

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 ***
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 *
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 ****

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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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