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Theater: Druggies, Diplomats and Deadheads In Unsatisfying Dramas

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PEOPLE, PLACES & THINGS ** out of ****

M. BUTTERFLY * 1/2 out of ****

RED ROSES, GREEN GOLD no stars out of ****

PEOPLE, PLACES & THINGS ** out of ****

ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE

If you're lucky, you've never met someone like Emma (Denise Gough) but you've certainly seen her in films and TV movies and after school specials. She is checking herself into drug rehab, feverishly puffing one last cigarette and describing a pharmacy worth of drugs currently in her system, all while drifting this way and that in a narcotic fog, a tilt-a-whirl of a woman almost parallel to the floor and defying gravity, like the Scarecrow in *The Wizard of Oz* minus the goofy charm. She's a mess.

Absolutely nothing that follows will surprise us. Emma resists treatment, kidding herself that she just needs to dry out and then get back to her hapless attempts at an acting career. Emma scoffs at group therapy, won't take the drugs intended to ease her withdrawal symptoms, befriends some fellow "inmates" (one of whom you just know must be martyred), fails at recovery, truly hits rock bottom and eventually begins to do the really hard work of facing herself, acknowledging her problems and putting herself back together again.

Invariably, a wise counselor/therapist/authority figure will prove maddening but ultimately kind and Emma will start her journey back. Maybe our glimpse into her life will end with her starting this cycle all over again, maybe it will end with her "graduation" from the group or maybe we'll see her sober and safe and maybe, just maybe think she'll be alright. If there are only so many stories to tell, this is how the one about addiction usually tracks.

Gough won the Olivier Award for her technically commanding performance in this show. (And she'll be on Broadway soon with *Angels In America*.) Director Jeremy Herrin (*Wolf Hall*) and his top-notch creative team

offer up a striking set (Bunny Christie of *Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time*), assaultive sound (Tom Gibbons of Broadway's *1984*), immersive video and projections (Andrzej Goulding of *Groundhog Day*) and indulgent casting worthy of an opera (five actors on standby just for a brief visual flourish).

But what does it matter? None of the bells and whistles can paper over a perfunctory, too familiar script by Duncan Macmillan (also of *1984*) that tackles drug addiction, the spiral down and a tentative road to recovery without missing a single step (or even twelve).

All we can hope is that this particular story will be specific or funny or somehow find a fresh angle so this old tale will seem new again. Certainly, *People, Places & Things* does its damndest on the production level: the set is a striking open-aired U, covered in white tiles with staff and other addicts melting in and out of scenes as in a fever dream. In an early surprise, a scrim is pulled down after a few minutes to reveal half the audience has been seated on the other side of the stage. Unfortunately for the folks sitting on the other side, the show did not feel staged with everyone in mind. The director seemed to play most of the action towards our half, leaving the distinct feeling that the others were shortchanged.

It's the sort of thing one might not notice (or selfishly ignore) if the show were more dramatically involving. But that's exactly what the story did not accomplish. A rather large cast of characters is introduced in therapy...and promptly dropped. Many add virtually nothing to the story other than an audience for Emma's meltdowns and scathing disdain. Two fare better. Nathaniel Martello-White makes something out of nothing as Mark, a fellow addict who joins the staff and shows kindness to Emma. Barbara Marten has more to do in

dual roles, both a doctor and a therapist, easily evoking wit and empathy and insight as the Authority Figure guiding Emma to the light. She has a certain Kathleen Chalfant-like dignity and intelligence that is appealing. But the show lazily has her playing two different characters without really attempting to make them remotely different (the therapist briefly feels a little hippie-ish but that quickly disappears).

It's just another detail that seems interesting but never deepens into truth: Emma's friend has the same name as her dead brother, religion is brought up haphazardly, she repeatedly compares therapy to acting (and acting to life) and so on. The latter is well worth a memorable line or two but one feels the show intended it to carry more import. Ditto a scene where Emma wigs out and the stage is flooded with actresses dressed just like her, a visual embodiment of her confused state, her splintered selves or what have you. This catches the eye (and they repeat it a second time, simply because they can, apparently) but other than getting across "confusion" what precisely is the point? That idea was already driven home by the thumping music, aggressive and disorienting lighting and general state of panic created on stage by the cast. Considered for a moment, this idea feels pointless, adding nothing dramatically to the proceedings any more than the "reveal" that half the audience was seated on the other side of the stage. "And...?" you wonder.

Certainly Denise Gough as Emma delivers an impressive turn, even if it never remotely got under my skin. (My guest felt more positive about her.) Like the heroine in David Hare's *Plenty*, Emma holds forth with slashing energy. Hare's Susan was never more alive than during the war. And Emma insists she is never more alive than when high. There is no God, everyone is acting all the time anyway and she's not the problem — the screwed up world is the problem! Her reaction to it (drugs, drugs and more drugs) is the only sane response, she insists, an argument that would be more convincing if she wasn't covered in sick, alone, friendless and worried even her parents will have had enough and turn their back on her.

Macmillan's script stumbles by calling for all the riotous bells and whistles that slow down the real drama of Emma taking a good look in the mirror. All of that sound and fury drags out her brief journey, making it harder to sustain momentum on such a familiar arc. There's an intermission and just to keep our nerves on edge, they keep music thumping throughout. It's not enough.

It's a credit to Marten and Martello-White that they hold our interest with thin material. Marten is let down by playing two characters who are identical; they should have been the same person or given more distinct personalities. (She also does very well as Emma's mother.) Martello-White is let down even more badly. In Act One, we quickly learn that Mark is intelligent and a fan of theater — he calls out Emma's fake confession in therapy by pointing out she's repeating the plot of *Hedda Gabler*. In Act Two? Suddenly he's too dumb to have even heard of *Don Quixote*, she slags him for having cartoons as his only frame of reference and tells Mark to read a book sometime. It's true that our heroine is an unreliable character and we can't trust what we're seeing from moment to moment, but this undermining of Mark's one distinct trait serves no purpose.

It's no spoiler to say Emma does take one of her twelve steps by talking to her parents. This is the show's best moment, aided by the canny decision to have Mom and Dad played by the actors who play her therapist and a fellow addict. But Macmillan undermines this modest triumph with an unforgivable cheat.

SPOILER

We know our heroine dreams of restarting her acting career, though the idea of going out on an audition seems as daunting to her as climbing Mount Everest. After two and a half hours, we've seen her slowly sober up, claim her many failings and have a painful reckoning with her parents that is better (Dad) and worse (Mom) than she imagined. That showdown also contains a real bombshell. The bedrock of therapy is total honesty and we discover "Emma" lied to everyone in the group about her real name. (This elicits gasps from the audience, just to make clear how significant it is in context.)

That's fine: it could show our belief that she has a chance at sobriety is perhaps misplaced; indeed we soon see her staring at a box of drugs that glow with an unearthly, tempting light. But this thunderbolt of a twist is undercut a moment later by seeing a cleaned-up, human Emma actually going to an audition and delivering the monologue she's been practicing the entire show. This moment is presented as quietly triumphant — not because she's so good but simply because she did it. It's a victory — all the more believable for being minor key — we are meant to applaud. Yet how can that be after what the show *just* told us about her unwillingness to trust the process and be forthcoming in therapy?

A better play might present all this in ambiguous terms about acting and honesty and our desperate need to believe in rebirth. But *People, Places & Things* doesn't seem to realize it is having its cake (she wasn't honest!) and eating it too (she's back to auditioning!). Like Emma, it offers flash and fury to avoid the simple plain fact that her journey is not remarkable or unique or special. It ignores most of the people around her, failing to see them as more than types (such as a teenage junkie who turns tricks, a nutty old man who gets religion, etc). The few people it does acknowledge remain fuzzy, like the man who is culturally savvy one minute and ignorant the next. And while it enjoys the easy shock of one last surprise (she was lying the entire time), it also wants the easy comfort of pretending she'll be alright, if only not to end on a downer. I'm not sure if our heroine is ever honest with herself. But I know the play isn't.

M. BUTTERFLY * 1/2 out of ****

CORT THEATRE

What a pity. I missed the original Tony-winning production of *M. Butterfly* back in 1988. I skipped the poorly reviewed film. So now, finally, after almost 30 years I get a chance to see the first Broadway revival...only to immediately feel I'll have to wait longer to fairly judge playwright David Henry Hwang's most popular drama. Maybe it's an evergreen. Maybe its time has passed. I certainly can't compare the original script with whatever tweaks have apparently been done to reflect our more sophisticated appreciation for gender fluidity and the like. But I do know this flat, un-involving production can't possibly be presenting the play in the best possible light.

Worse, it's ugly. Director Julie Taymor has a dismaying disinterest in actors — it's no mistake her best work by far is on the truly spectacular musical *The Lion King*, which has excellent puppetry, showmanship and very

little demands on the cast in terms of performance. While I worried stars Clive Owen and Ha Jin (making his Broadway debut) would be on their own in tackling this ambitious story, I assumed at least the visual aspect would be stirring.

Instead, Taymor and her team have chosen a clumsy series of giant panels to accommodate everything from a prison cell in France in 1986 to an embassy to the streets of Beijing. They are pushed around on stage this way and that, failing to join neatly time and time again and leaving gaps, only to have them shoved together clumsily a little later. Conceptually, the idea is fine but the execution is shoddy and deeply unsatisfying. Instead of having one setting melt into the next you're desperately aware of the panels from start to finish and hoping they'll hit their mark.

While one can forgive a Broadway chorus for not nailing the specific, stunningly precise choreography of classical Chinese opera, those scenes underline even further how lacking in élan Taymor's presentation proves to be.

All of this is disheartening for we should be readier than ever to embrace the story. In it, a French diplomat is imprisoned, the butt of jokes the world over and desperate to tell his story. It begins with a childhood infatuation with the opera *Madama Butterfly*, where Owen charmingly captures a little boy being swept up in the moment of live theater. Quickly we learn the more salient facts about Rene Gallimard. He is sexually repressed in some way, scared of intimacy, a bit of a clod at work in the diplomatic corps and has a passionless but polite marriage to Agnes (Enid Graham, fine in a thankless role).

All of that changes at a boring garden party where he witnesses a performer sing an aria from *Madama Butterfly*. Song Liling doesn't have a particularly good voice but he cuts to the core of the character and Rene is bewitched. Indeed, he refers to the artist (Ha Jin) as mademoiselle and the performer is pleased at Rene's willingness to continue his artifice of playing female roles. Here Ha is at his best, brusquely mocking Rene's embrace of the cliched image of a tragic Asian heroine and daring the official to come to see him perform at the Peking Opera.

Soon Rene does just that, they strike up a friendship and perhaps to both their surprise it becomes clear that Rene must see this man as a woman. Whether for fear of being gay or simply because it's the illusion he prefers, his unspoken need is to have this person embody his idea of the perfect Asian woman. With Song Liling already under suspicion for being gay and embracing Western values (he owns women's clothing...with lace!), the authorities demand he spy on Rene and pump him for information.

They come to an unspoken understanding. Song Liling will give Rene his illusion. The gossip that Rene's got a mistress boosts his stock at work, which inexplicably means his two-bit insights into the Asian mind and the burgeoning Vietnam War are taken seriously and passed on to the highest levels. In return, Rene gives Song Liling a desperate love that is based on lies and self-delusion but, hey, nobody's perfect. Their romance continues for some twenty years, with Rene whisking his lover out of China and getting a divorce so they can be together. And you needn't suspend your disbelief: it's all based on a true story, including the astonishment of one and all that Rene and Song Liling both insisted he never truly realized that his lover was in fact a man.

Our astonishment is less today. We are more savvy about these things, from the tucking of drag queens to create an illusion (thank you RuPaul) to the sliding scale of desire that can mean a man might prefer a "woman" who was a man instead of an actual woman or an actual man. But of course it's not the mechanics we need or want explained. It's the people behind them. Owen squints his eyes, almost shutting reality out from time to time and that's about it for insight. His Rene is not so complicated: for the first time in his life he finds someone that he desires and feels comfortable with. What more does he need or want to know? Ha is strongest in the scenes where he reveals the assertive artist, taunting Rene and his Western ways or haughtily making demands of his government contact. But this persona, this Butterfly surely should be a tour de force — singing, dancing, playing a man, playing a woman, playing a man who is playing a woman, keeping us off balance as to whether he enjoys Rene's confused yearning or is just using the man to protect himself while China goes through another one of Mao's purges. It will take another show for us to know better what Ha can do.

Whether time has passed it by or this production simply doesn't do it justice, the play feels far too straightforward and uncomplicated. Too...uninteresting, which is surely the last thing in the world anyone would have said about it in 1988. Instead of a blissful confusion (Wait, is that a man or a woman? Is Rene gay, bi or just clueless?) we feel two steps ahead of everyone else. The only ambiguity that remains is in the elegant simplicity of the title. Remove just one letter from Mr. or Ms. and — voila! — *M. Butterfly* embodies everything the play wants to suggest. Spell it out as this production does and the story loses its power.

RED ROSES, GREEN GOLD no stars out of ****

MINETTA LANE THEATRE

You can't see everything so choices must be made. And I committed a rookie mistake when opting to see *Red Roses, Green Gold*, a jukebox musical that draws on the rich catalog of the Grateful Dead. The hardest part of creating a musical is coming up with great songs and I lazily thought, well at least the songs will be good! Apparently, everyone involved had the same lazy reaction. They have literally nothing to offer but mediocre renditions of Grateful Dead songs ripped out of context and asked to do things — develop characters, advance a plot — they were never intended for.

A creative team may have access to classic songs by the Beach Boys or Bob Dylan or Elvis Presley or any other songbook you can name, but that doesn't mean they have a show. The better the songs are, the more an audience loves them. The less a show knows what to do with them, the more annoying and exhausting the musical will prove. I'm not a Deadhead — I can't argue for an August 13, 1975 concert as *obviously* superior to the New Year's Eve concert from 1978. But I know enough to feel bad on behalf of poor Jerry Garcia.

The plot — such as it is — plays like a sketch from *Hee-Haw*. I told my guest if the show began with "Truckin'" we were in big trouble. Well it began with the cast jamming to a song, introducing themselves...and *then* moved on to "Truckin'." The set by Robert Andrew Kovach was about the only promising element, offering all sorts of homey Americana touches, though I feared a bear rug on one wall wasn't genuine. It certainly *looked*

fake (as if they were worried about offending animal rights activists) and a fake animal skin would be apt for this faux down-homey bit of hokum.

If the set was intended to work well with the projection design of Brad Peterson then even it was a failure. Every time they flashed something on the walls it made the set appear garish and ugly while the projections were lost amid all the clutter on display. This was no worse than the mishmash of costumes, the acting that ranged from broad to desperately broad (I couldn't blame them, though I wanted to), the clumsy choreography of director Rachel Klein, the random decision to show extended clips from the silent film *The Great Train Robbery* and amidst all that rubbish some of the great songs of the Dead delivered with bare minimum competence.

It ended with the band's sole hit song, the 1987 fluke "Touch Of Grey." The lyrics assure you, "I will get by/ I will survive." Yes, but barely.

Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

The Liar *** 1/2

Jitney *** 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) *** 1/2

Significant Other * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) ** (third visit, but *** if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) ** 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) *** 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) ****

The Light Years * 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) *** 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips **

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) *

Come From Away *

Miss Saigon **

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba * 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s **

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) ***

Latin History For Morons * 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

War Paint **

In and Of Itself ***

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) ***

The Antipodes **

Anastasia **

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory **

Oslo *** 1/2

The Little Foxes **

Groundhog Day ** 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O'Hara at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra **

A Doll's House, Part 2 *** 1/2

Bandstand ** 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) ***

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) **

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) ** 1/2

Rooms **

Arlington ***

All The President's Men (Public Theater one-night event at Town Hall) ** 1/2

Happy Days (w Dianne Wiest) *** 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret *** 1/2

The Whirligig * 1/2

Sojourners and Her Portmanteau **

Broadway By The Year 1997-2006 ***

The Boy Who Danced On Air ** 1/2

The Government Inspector ** 1/2

A Doll's House, Part 2 (with Julie White and Stephen McKinley Henderson) ***

Desperate Measures ***

The Honeymooners **

People, Places & Things **

M. Butterfly * 1/2

Red Roses, Green Gold no stars

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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.