
Theater: Edie Falco Checks Out in *The Madrid*; *Wild Bride* Checks In at St. Ann's Warehouse

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THE MADRID * 1/2 out of ****
THE WILD BRIDE ** 1/2 out of ****

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MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT NY CITY CENTER

Once, the mere act of a woman slamming the door on her marriage could be a seismic event in the theater. Today, tell someone that a play is about a woman who abruptly leaves her husband and adult daughter to live alone and the response would be, "And...?"

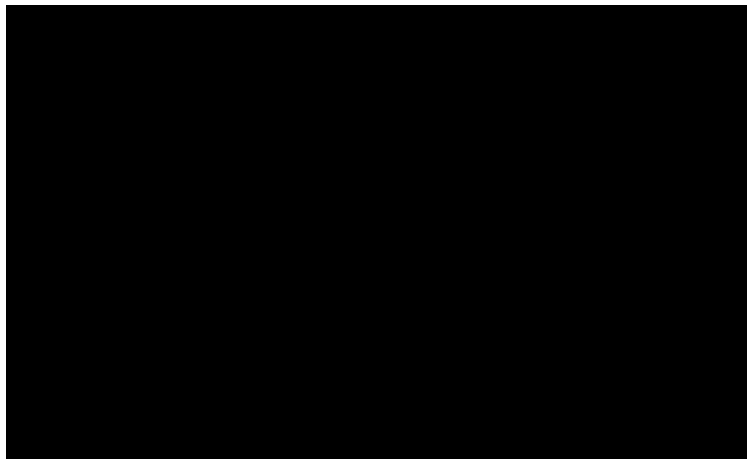
That something more never arrives in the tension-free drama *The Madrid*, which stars Edie Falco as the woman who escapes domesticity to forge a new life. She and the rest of the cast spend the play struggling to make sense of characters and a story by Liz Flahive that gives precious little insight into any of them and then undercuts what little we think we know to no positive effect.

It begins with Falco as Martha, a kindergarten teacher sharing the work of each student with the class. She seems oddly awkward with a little girl who keeps asking questions; clearly Martha is not a natural with kids. Briefly inspired, she lets the little girl take her place and then steps out of the classroom and apparently out of her life.

Months later we meet her daughter Sarah (Phoebe Strole) and her husband John (John Ellison Conlee, in a thankless role so vague it allows him to make no impression at all). They're bereft and confused since Martha left a brief and enigmatic message (essentially, "I'm outta here!") and hasn't been heard from since. Confused, they're having a yard sale to get rid of the items in their home that haunt John and try and start afresh, always wondering where Martha is and why she left and whether she'll ever return.

Martha's best friend Becca (Heidi Schreck) is also having trouble getting on with her life. She and Martha spoke every day and now, suddenly, she's alone. Becca keeps poking her head into their home and lives, trying to help or perhaps trying to find some reason for what happened. She even has her husband Danny (Christopher Evan Welch, almost making something out of a nebulous role) follow the 21-year-old Sarah around to make sure she's okay.

Then, for no discernible reason, Martha pops back into Sarah's life, wishing her a happy birthday at the Starbuck's where Sarah works, inviting her to join Martha at the shabby apartment building where she lives nearby and maybe have a drink at the local dive she frequents. No explanation, no confession, no apology, just hey, what's up? Wanna hang out?



Director Leigh Silverman, the cast and crew try to make sense of this vague story. It's the sort of play that avoids even the most elemental questions. How could Sarah be talking to her mother and not begin with the one question on everyone's mind: why did she leave? (It's mildly addressed in Act Two.) That ill-defined motivation is fleshed out ever so slowly as Sarah learns this isn't the first time her mother has felt trapped by family life. Once Sarah's no-nonsense grandmother (Frances Sternhagen,

doing her best) drags Martha back home by her hair from a commune of sorts. Another time, Martha confesses, she came close to abandoning a very young Sarah at a water park in another state, making it all the way to the car before hearing her name over a loudspeaker thwarted the off-the-cuff decision. It comes rather late in the show to offer up such essential information. It's one thing for a person to feel trapped in a life they find unfulfilling. It's quite another to abandon a small child in a strange city and state; that would turn Martha from unhappy to more like unhinged. So what is it? What's driving Martha? What can Falco do other than get on with it and hope somehow this lack of insight will somehow be mysterious and intriguing to the rest of us. The show never remotely begins to unravel that and it certainly doesn't use her actions to reveal the other characters in her life, all of whom are equally fuzzy.

The scenic design by David Zinn is functional, featuring the living room of Martha and John's home at the center with quick changes to suggest a school room, a bar and the appropriately rundown apartment where Martha now lives. But the living room is almost always front and center, a mute reminder of the domestic life she has abandoned. It might just as easily reflect the empty drama that has not been peopled at the heart of this story.

In a clear sign of how poorly thought out the script is, virtually everything we have been told about the main characters is unsatisfyingly contradicted by the finale. Sarah knows better than anyone that her mother is gone for good...but then at the yardsale she goes to take a nap and tells her dad to wake her up if Martha returns. Martha's neighbor Becca is clearly an interfering, do-gooder who means well but is driving Sarah and John crazy and needs to back off...until suddenly Sarah (who has been rightly irritated by Becca's behavior) is proclaiming her practically family. Becca's husband Danny is the most interesting character in some ways and when Sarah makes an impetuous pass at him (perhaps just to see how he'll react) he politely pulls away...until we're told he's a serial seducer who emotionally latches on to younger women in a creepy manner. Sternhagen's elderly Rose wants to keep driving after she's no longer fit to do so (like many elderly people who don't want to lose that freedom) but she's sharp as a tack, no nonsense and in complete control of her faculties...until in a final scene she's suddenly confused and suffering from dementia. Martha proves similarly contradictory. We don't know these characters because Flahive (a producer on Falco's Emmy winning TV series *Nurse Jackie*) hasn't figured out who they are either.

One scene however gives one hope that Flahive has the makings of a dramatist. It's like an oasis in the desert of this tepid work when a late scene finds many of the characters at the emergency room. Rose has had a second car accident, though this one might have been caused by the 16-year-old son of Becca. His name is Dylan (Seth Clayton) and he's a very tall kid whose joints cause him tremendous pain. In a funny and sweet exchange firmly rooted in character, Sarah and Rose banter back and forth with Dylan. First, Rose calls Dylan a giant and bluntly talks about a young fellow she once knew who had a glandular problem and ultimately hung himself. But it's a lot easier now for someone like him, she says, because there's so much more on TV. He and Sarah develop an easy rapport as she asks him about his condition and his life, with Dylan complaining that his mom Becca has discovered texting and now does it all the time, even texting him when they're both at home and she's downstairs and he's upstairs. Clayton has fun with the mournful, put-upon voice of a teen that's not self-pitying but can't help feeling the injustice of an annoying mother. And he has a great response when Rose tells him to keep a lookout for the others; he's so tall she's certain he'll be able to spot them from far off. Real characters can surprise and entertain us when we know who they are. For a brief moment in *The Madrid*, we do.

THE WILD BRIDE ** 1/2 out of ** ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE**

The Kneehigh theater company is an innovative troupe that has delivered some of the more provocative and entertaining works in recent years, most notably *Brief Encounter* (a marvelous re-imagining of the classic British film) and *The Red Shoes*. Here they've tackled a folk tale via a Mike Leigh-style collaboration. The show is never locked in, since the addition of new actors will cause them to rethink how a role is played, the music, the costumes and much else. *The Wild Bride* isn't remotely as satisfying as other works we've seen by Kneehigh, but their intelligence and passion is always welcome.

Director/adaptor and Joint Artistic Director of Kneehigh Emma Rice tackled *The Wild Bride* once many years ago. It tells the story of a farmer who is tricked by the Devil into accepting jewels and fine clothes in exchange for whatever is in his back yard. Since all you can find in his back yard is an old apple tree, the farmer gladly agrees. Of course, when the Devil shows up to collect, the farmer realizes to his horror that his one and only child is in the back yard too. He begs and pleads to get out of the bargain, offering himself in return. But the Devil will have none of it. When the girl proves too pure to touch, the Devil forces the farmer to chop off her innocent hands. Still the girl is too pure for him to take possession. She abandons her father and lives in the woods, where a prince falls in love with this feral woman and makes him his wife. War interferes and the devil tries to create more mischief but ultimately a true heart prevails.

This current incarnation feels like an indifferent stew, with all sorts of different elements tossed in higgledy piggledy. Throughout the show we have a live band performing mostly blues and spirituals (such as "Dry Bones"). The Devil (Andrew Durand) is also played with a southern accent so it all fits. But then musically we also get the Girl (Audrey Bisson) doing some lovely wordless vocalizing that's vaguely Gaelic. And a key battle scene includes Portishead's "Machine Gun" when surely another live performance of a blistering blues tune would have fit in perfectly. More germane to the entertainment value, the actors were not cast for their singing ability and even the best of them has no particular affinity for the blues. We also jump from the South to Scotland so we can have a prince and then on to World War I when the story should feel timeless.

The casting is also problematic. Stuart Goodwin plays the father and the prince. He's an appealing actor albeit more successful as the desperate father than the jokey turn as the prince. But the doubling up here with Goodwin playing both the dad and the lover of the same character adds a creepy undertone. That woman is also played by three different actresses: Audrey Bisson, violin-toting Patrycja Kujawska and choreographer Etta Murfitt. The actors take over after a key transition, with Bisson playing the daughter, Kujawska playing the bride and Murfitt playing the mother. Nonetheless, the change in actor feels arbitrary and rather pointless, especially since Bisson is by far the best. Her early expressiveness in an essentially silent part (the Devil steals the girl's voice and it's only at the feminist finale she finds her ability to speak and says "No!") is engaging and winning.

We miss her presence as the lead very much when the role is passed off to others.

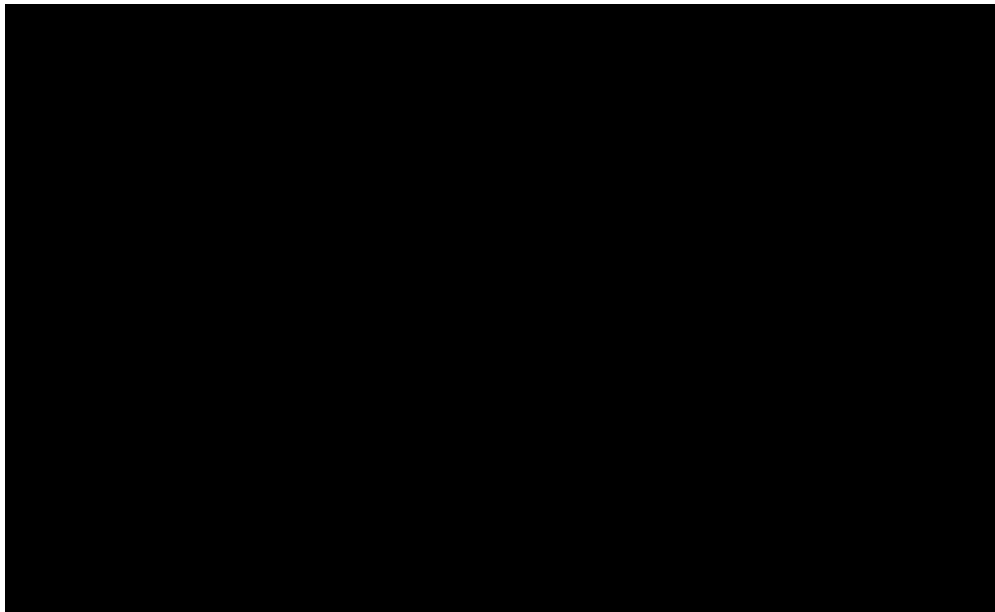
Finally, Durand doesn't have the menace that the Devil requires, though this is due perhaps entirely to the role as written and the show as conceived. Typically in a folk tale, people might be undone by their own greed. If the Devil is trumped, it might be because he is too greedy or gets outwitted by the protagonist or simply confounded by the willing sacrifice of someone he is trying to ensnare.

But in *The Wild Bride*, none of this happens. Our heroine is a mute presence, pure goodness in a rather passive and uninteresting manner. The Devil is frustrated and impotent throughout the show. Everything he tries is frustrated until he is simply worn down by the Girl's meek goodness and goes away. No sacrifice, no cleverness, no growth or change for the Girl or her Father or the Prince or anyone.

Indeed, we're told how pure she is; the Devil can't even bear to touch her. This changes later in the show, though it's not spelled out why. She ultimately becomes strong enough to send him away but not for any particular reason we can discern. In fact, the Girl abandons her father and never sees him again, even though he never meant her harm and did everything in his power to protect her once the Devil's evil plan was clear. Yes, he erred in greed, but he would have done anything to save his child. One would imagine her punishing him so might in fact have left her less than pure and open to the Devil's wooing but that idea is dropped.

It's a long two hours (folk tales should be brief) rescued somewhat by directorial touches and an enthusiastic cast. The sound design by Simon Baker is subtle and effective while the vivid set dominated by a bare tree with spindly branches courtesy of Bill Mitchell creates the right Grimm aura. Having the Queen played mostly by an oil painting with arms sticking out through the canvas was a typically witty touch. The costumes by Myriddin Wannell try to make what sense they can of the melange of settings, though I'm certain no matter what time period we're in that the Devil does not wear longjohns. (He's not modest about his body and would don boxers or briefs, at the most.) The lighting by Malcolm Rippeth is excellent and does the most to create the right magical atmosphere from the start. The dances by Murfitt are invariably well done though increasingly unmotivated by the story.

Give the Devil his due; he's usually an invigorating character. Even a modern, feminist refraction of an old folk tale should realize that you need a good villain worthy of outsmarting or there's nothing for your heroine to triumph over.



THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare in the Park with Lily Rabe) ****

Chimichangas And Zoloff *

Closer Than Ever ***

Cock ** 1/2

Harvey with Jim Parsons *

My Children! My Africa! ***

Once On This Island ***

Potted Potter *

Storefront Church ** 1/2

Title And Deed ***

Picture Incomplete (NYMF) **

Flambe Dreams (NYMF) **

Rio (NYMF) **

The Two Month Rule (NYMF) *

Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2

Stealing Time (NYMF) **

Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2
Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ***
Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2
How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2
Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***
Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2
Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2
Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2
Living With Henry (NYMF) *
A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2
The Last Smoker In America **
Gore Vidal's The Best Man (w new cast) ***
Into The Woods at Delacorte ** 1/2
Bring It On: The Musical **
Bullet For Adolf *
Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc. **
Harrison, TX ***
Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck" (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Pink Milk (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Who Murdered Love (FringeNYC) no stars
Storytime With Mr. Buttermen (FringeNYC) **
#MormonInChief (FringeNYC) **
An Interrogation Primer (FringeNYC) ***
An Evening With Kirk Douglas (FringeNYC) *
Sheherizade (FringeNYC) **
The Great Pie Robbery (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Independents (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
The Dick and The Rose (FringeNYC) **
Magdalen (FringeNYC) ***
Bombsheltered (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Paper Plane (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Rated M For Murder (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Mallory/Valerie (FringeNYC) *
Non-Equity: The Musical! (FringeNYC) *
Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
City Of Shadows (FringeNYC) ***
Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking ***
Salamander Starts Over (FringeNYC) ***
Pieces (FringeNYC) *
The Train Driver ***
Chaplin The Musical * 1/2
Detroit ** 1/2
Heartless at Signature **
Einstein On The Beach at BAM ****
Red-Handed Otter ** 1/2
Marry Me A Little **
An Enemy Of The People ** 1/2
The Old Man And The Old Moon *** 1/2
A Chorus Line at Papermill ***
Helen & Edgar ***
Grace * 1/2
Cyrano de Bergerac **
Who's Afraid Of Virginia Woolf? ***
Disgraced **
Annie ** 1/2
The Heiress **
Checkers ** 1/2
Ivanov ***
Golden Child at Signature ** 1/2
Giant at the Public *** 1/2
Scandalous * 1/2
Forever Dusty **
The Performers **
The Piano Lesson at Signature *** 1/2
Un Ballo In Maschera at the Met *** 1/2 (singing) * (production) so call it ** 1/2
A Christmas Story: The Musical **
The Sound Of Music at Papermill ***
My Name Is Asher Lev *** 1/2
Golden Boy **
A Civil War Christmas ** 1/2
Dead Accounts **
The Anarchist *
Glengarry Glen Ross **

Bare **
The Mystery Of Edwin Drood ** 1/2
The Great God Pan ** 1/2
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

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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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