
Theater: Ethan Coen Births A Play; "Simpsons" Survives; Shaw Thrives!

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WOMEN OR NOTHING ** 1/2 out of ****

MR. BURNS, A POST-ELECTRIC PLAY * 1/2 out of ****

YOU NEVER CAN TELL *** out of ****

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ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY

When a play ends and the audience is caught short -- uncertain of whether to applaud -- it's a clear sign the show is one or two drafts away from being ready. That's certainly the case for Ethan Coen's first full-length play. The filmmaker has turned out a string of one acts so perhaps it's no surprise this play has two strong scenes that stand nicely on their own. Unfortunately, it also has two bookends that go nowhere.

The set-up is simple: two career women want to have a child. Gretchen (Halley Feiffer, the weak link in an otherwise strong cast) is luring a nice male co-worker over to their apartment under false pretenses. Here's the plan. Gretchen fails to show. Her partner Laura (Susan Pourfar) poses as a neighbor letting him in, they share a drink and before you know it...baby! This nice guy Chuck (Robert Beitzel) is perfect because he's a great guy, he already has a daughter with an ex-wife, the kid is adorable and he's moving from New York City to Florida so he can be closer to his child. What could go wrong?

It's the likely beginning to a farcical comedy. Surely Laura will find herself attracted to Chuck in unexpected ways and their relationship will be tested rather than reinforced with a child. Just as likely, a third party -- in this case, Laura's mom (the indefatigable Deborah Rush) -- will also appear to complicate the ruse even further.

Indeed, all of this happens but it's to Coen's growing confidence as a writer that he plumbs this situation not for humor (though humor is abundant in the middle scenes) but for its emotional complexity.



(Photo by Kevin Thomas Garcia)

This is the world premiere of *Women Or Nothing* and it might be the casting that left me confused as to the play's intent for a while. Feiffer and Pourfar have virtually no chemistry whatsoever, so it's hard to know exactly how sturdy their relationship is meant to be. It doesn't help that Feiffer's Gretchen is a bit of a dolt with the ethics of a flea. Her arguments as to why a fertility clinic is a terrible option make no sense. And it isn't until the final scene that the smarter Laura finally -- but obliquely -- raises the issue of their deception. If Gretchen objects to a father that would ejaculate sperm into a test tube and then walk away, why doesn't she object to a mother who would con a man into unintentionally creating a life but refuse to let him know about it?

Before these more serious issues can be raised, we're simply confused. Are we to believe these two capable, intelligent women of means (one a famed concert pianist) living in New York City are in the closet? It's hardly out of the question, but if Gretchen is too afraid to come out at her law firm, one wonders what kind of mother she'd be? And shouldn't a lawyer be able to argue more convincingly? Then there's the distracting element of an over-the-top oil painting Gretchen takes from the bedroom and places in the living room. It depicts a naked woman writhing on the rocks by a shore, or something. If she's in the closet -- as seems the case, since Chuck thinks they're going on a date -- why place this very lesbian bit of erotica on display? To arouse him? Won't that blow her cover? And what the heck is the magazine *Cosmopolitan* meant to convey? That she's definitely straight? Then why the sapphic art work? You know you're in trouble when a show raises more questions than it answers.

Yet once that very shaky first scene is over and a man arrives, *Women Or Nothing* ironically comes to life. Pourfar and Beitzel have terrific chemistry and their big scene together crackles. He's a Gary Cooper-esque tall glass of water, a man's man who is also reflective and thoughtful. But not neurotic (or so we think). Chuck is by all lights intelligent, sexy, and sincere. Laura's initial nervousness reveals itself by peppering him with cocktail party questions (eg. what one trait would you change about yourself if you could?), drinking steadily and slowly realizing that the only thing scarier than seducing this unwitting sperm donor is knowing how much she likes him.

The following scene is almost as good, when Laura's mom Dorene pops in and fences with first her daughter and then Chuck. She's tart, droll, exceptionally observant and very very funny thanks to Rush's pitch perfect delivery. The only problem with the scene is that while information is revealed the plot is not genuinely moved forward. Then it ends with Laura and Gretchen alone, tentatively hoping the future won't be as complicated as the last 24 hours. Coen's play -- directed ably by the talented David Cromer -- raises many questions about parenthood and responsibility. But it raises many more questions about these characters and their motivations and where they might be headed that can only be

answered after another draft or two.

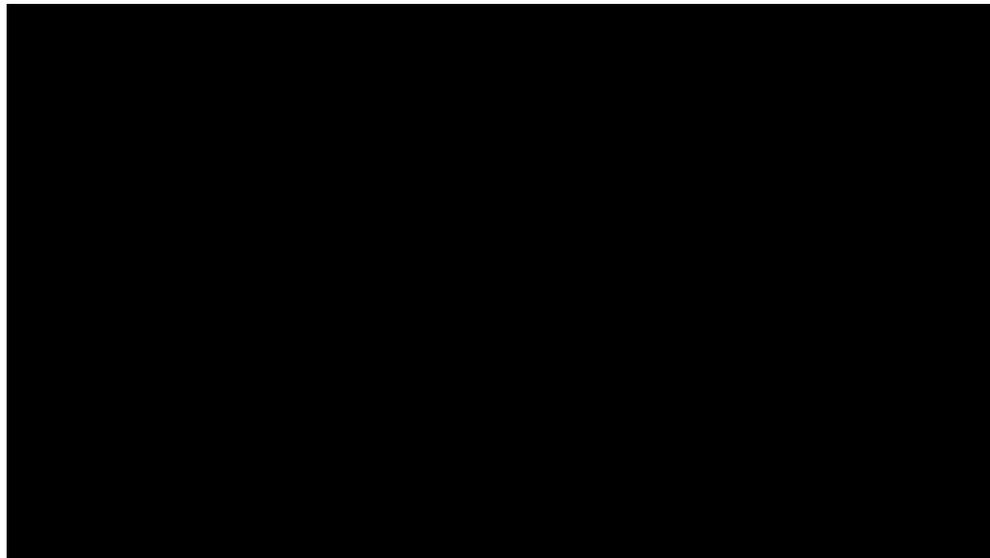
MR. BURNS, A POST-ELECTRIC PLAY * 1/2 out of ****
PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZON

Playwright Anne Washburn's new show is an intellectually admirable but dramatically inert conceit posing as a drama. An initially intriguing set-up is replaced by a second act set seven years in the future that offers up another, mildly intriguing conceit only to have that replaced by a third act set 75 years in the future that is even more remote emotionally and intellectually. You can nod your head and say, "Yes, I see what you're doing," but you can't actually enjoy it.

In the first act, a group of people -- survivors, really -- are huddled by a fire. It's dark and they're wary of what might be out there in the shadows though we don't know why. To kill time or perhaps to discover some common ground, these people are piecing together an episode of *The Simpsons*. Matt (the inestimable Matthew Maher) is the de facto nerd in chief here, mildly correcting line readings or approving descriptions of scenes as they come to mind. One person seems mildly shell-shocked, another keeps watch with a gun at the ready and they're all on edge.

When a stranger arrives and is patted down for weapons, we piece together what's happening. The power grid has collapsed and this has meant that after days or weeks nuclear power plants have gone, well, nuclear. Society is in disarray, people are scattered to the four winds and no one is sure who has survived or why. In one of Washburn's best touches, we realize that a custom has arisen: when you meet someone new, you ask them about ten people you know, ten people you are wondering whether or not they've come across in their travels. They, in turn, may ask you about ten people. We realize that this makes sense; if there wasn't some agreed upon limit, some custom to rule this desperate desire to find a loved one, people would never stop asking questions.

The stranger Gibson (a strong Gibson Frazier) offers up another piece of *The Simpsons* episode they were recreating. It's hilarious and touching how complex and rich with allusions even one episode of the show proves to be. When a reference to a Gilbert & Sullivan song comes up, Frazier proves an expert and only the slightest prodding has him up and singing lines from *The Mikado*. Here is the beginning to a potentially fascinating play.



Unfortunately, that first act leads nowhere. In the second act, it's seven years later and these same people are now members of a traveling theater troupe that performs episodes of *The Simpsons*. Their biggest rival has a LOT more episodes in its repertoire and in the show's funniest moment, Maher is bitter over the fact that their enemies are doing "A Streetcar Named Marge," one of the show's most famous musical episodes. This act might

also have been the start of an interesting play. Though familiar to sci-fi fans, this dystopian future has a few neat twists. They reenact *Simpsons* episodes and commercials (heavy on references to food people can no longer get) and even musical medleys. In another clever touch, there's a bartering system in place: the troupe pays people for material, that is scenes or bits of dialogue from episodes of *The Simpsons* they haven't already remembered themselves. It might have been a funny refraction of the theater world under extreme circumstances, but before we can really get a handle on these characters and their relationships, that rival theater troupe shows up guns a-blazing.

The final act reveals Washburn's ultimate purpose. Here we are 75 years in the future. The entire act is simply a performance of a troupe doing a show. It's nominally an episode of *The Simpsons*, but here the characters are indicated by the masks worn in Greek theater. And the storyline involving Bart's showdown with Mr. Burns is far removed from any real plot. Washburn is showing how pop culture endures, how these figures embedded in our consciousness can take on totemic meaning. Just as people in the past created new stories involving the gods (or Robin Hood or whomever) to understand their world and find comfort, so people in a post-apocalyptic future might somehow alight on Marge and Homer and Lisa and Bart (here played well by Quincy Tyler Bernstine) and use them to make sense of the horror that occurred.

One can imagine a tale that made powerful use of these characters we know so well. How strangely touching it would be to hear a plea for peace and sanity in the scratchy voice of Marge. How odd it would be to see Bart saving the world and have it actually be a genuine hope for the hero in us all. But what we actually watch in that final act is an uninteresting, vague tale that has a little to do with *The Simpsons*, a little to do with the tragic world the audience 75 years in the future must deal with and a little to do with some other ideas as well. But it's not moving or funny or weirdly compelling or anything that might have been hoped for. It's just an idea and not one brought fully to life or played by characters we know and whose confusion and pain we identify with.

Ambitious? Unquestionably. But in tackling such big ideas, Washburn forgot to root her play in characters and story. The best sci-fi tells a gripping tale and let's the ideas that power them be embedded quietly in the world or future that's been created. *Mr. Burns* puts the ideas first and leaves the characters far far behind, sitting by a fire and wondering if anyone is thinking about them at all.

YOU NEVER CAN TELL * out of ******

THE PEARL THEATRE COMPANY

Don't make the mistake I did. For years I heard about *The Pearl Theatre Company* but somehow never made it to one of their shows. I took them for granted, which is easy to do when a theater company is celebrating its 30th season. But they've moved into a handsome new home on 42nd Street between Tenth and Eleventh Avenue, where Signature Theatre used to live. It won't be such a walk once the 7 train is extended but really...isn't fun theater worth a little stroll?

Their new season is tied into a celebration of George Bernard Shaw called *Shaw New York*. That's pioneered by the *Gingold Theatrical Group* (nice logo!), whose artistic director David Staller is also the director of this revival of *You Never Can Tell*. Got it?

Now forget it. The point is that *You Never Can Tell* is light, breezy fun. Oh yes, Shaw meant to shock: his heroine is Margaret (Robin Leslie Brown), a modern woman who rejected her husband and raised three children all alone while writing best-selling guides to womanhood, parenting and the like. The eldest daughter Gloria (the lovely Amelia Pedlow) has been groomed to carry on her mother's fight for the vote and women's general emancipation; marriage is most certainly *not* in the cards. Along for the ride are two younger siblings raised in anarchy (Emma Wisniewski and Ben Charles) who cheekily wreck havoc with a smile.

Shaw's political instincts are admirable but his playwriting instincts are even stronger. A work that might once have shocked survives and is worth reviving because of its playful

heart. The women here are surely in the right about gender roles but wrong about romance and Shaw is wise enough to show it without undercutting their intelligence.



(Photo by Gregory Costanzo)

The Pearl's strong core of performers give a good enough accounting of the play that I'm surprised I've never seen it performed before. Its Shakespearean touches include mistaken identities, a magical air and a well-earned happy ending with the right bittersweet realism to make it mean something. Before you get there, a penniless dentist named Valentine (the very appealing Sean McNall) must woo Gloria, a difficult task since Gloria abhors the sentimental. In the show's centerpiece, Valentine runs circles around Gloria, declaring his love then declaring what nonsense it is to declare his love

and then saying how pretty she is but of course it isn't true he doesn't really think she's pretty but that's what his heart tells him and she wouldn't fall for such silly comments anyway though my god he's in love!

McNall and Pedlow are absolutely delightful in these scenes that whipsaw from the high to the low with ease. You're never sure exactly what Valentine truly believes (except that they're meant for each other) and that's exactly how he likes it. McNall was also wonderful as J.M. Barrie in the latest Pearl show I saw. He's right at home in this piece and matched moment by moment by Pedlow. Here's hoping New York can give her enough work to keep this talent in town longer since she's just one lucky break from a much bigger career.

Brown is formidable as Margaret Clandon despite stumbling a bit on her lines the night I caught and Bradford Cover fences nicely with her in a role that might easily have been all bluster. Charles and Wisniewski are delightfully naughty as the children and Dominic Cuskern able as their adviser. But Zachary Spicer positively stole the show in the final scene as the Queen's Council Walter Bohun. He strode onto the stage, barked out commands and was hilariously energizing.

The show needed that jolt because the main complaint is that the affable director David Staller set a too stately pace. That was reflected in the one performance -- technically solid -- that I didn't enjoy by Dan Daily as the waiter "William." He spoke in a slow, exaggerated cadence and with the show moving slower and slower his take on the role proved more provoking than it might have otherwise. Some snippets needed to be cut or a whip cracked to get things going at a much breezier pace.

Otherwise, the sets by Harry Feiner were especially charming, along with the costumes by Barbara A. Bell. The lighting by Stephen Petrilli was used perhaps once too often to highlight key moments in the show but was otherwise admirable. And the pleasure of seeing this Shaw for the first time in sympathetic surroundings led by the very talented McNall and Pedlow make the night worth catching. You never can tell what a night at the theater will bring you. But with the Pearl Theatre Company, you can be pretty darn certain.

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 ****

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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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