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Michael Giltz

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Theater: "Fifty Words" and "That Other Woman's Child"



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When a play like Michael Weller's *Fifty Words* (at MCC in New York City through October 25) dissects a relationship, it's hard not to take sides. A married couple, two lovers, indeed a relationship of any kind that gets put through the wringer is invariably going to draw you in. Who's in the right; who's wrong? Your sympathies tend to ping-pong back and forth with each new revelation. But as Adam (Norbert Leo Butz) and Jan (Elizabeth Marvel) bicker and fight the night before he goes away on a business trip and while their unseen son is away on a sleep-over, it's not

your sympathy that skip back and forth, it's your antipathy.

This far too routine story of domestic strife, with accusations of cold lovelessness on the one hand and serial unfaithfulness on the other doesn't reveal any great truths -- it just reveals two people who don't seem to belong in each other's company and certainly don't belong in ours. The most intriguing character is that little boy, a kid with a protective love of his hamster, a kid who has virtually no friends and a kid who tends to go hiding by piling up clothes in a closet and burrowing down to the bottom.

Fifty Words would like to burrow down as well to the heart of the matter, but that center is hollow. Two fine actors aren't shown to their best because of that. Marvel admirably plays Jan without any soft touches; she doesn't try and win our sympathy, thereby earning some. And Butz is rather high-pitched, the sort of performance one gives when you sense the material you've been handed isn't quite enough. This was my first chance to see this Tony-winning actor who's made a name for himself in musicals like *Thou Shalt Not*, *Wicked* and his star-making turn in *Dirty Rotten Scoundrels*. I kept thinking of Richard Dreyfuss and just like Dreyfuss -- or any good actor -- Butz can seem to be straining when the character is paper-thin. I look forward to seeing him in something more substantial.

What others are saying:

The New York Times' Ben Brantley said: "I don't know how engrossing I would have found this protracted apache dance if it hadn't been brought to such authentic and unsparing life by Mr. Butz, Ms. Marvel and [director Austin] Pendleton. The tirelessly physical performances here are unerringly dictated by the fierce, contradictory impulses of people who want to repel and magnetize at the same time."

The New York Daily News' Joe Dziemianowicz said: Two stars out of five. "It's never a good sign when a review begins by praising a play's set. So let's get right to the superb scenic design of "Fifty Words," the unimpeachable aspect of Michael Weller's disagreeable marriage drama...."

The New York Post's Frank Scheck said: Two stars out of four. "Unfortunately, the play never quite convinces, due to endless, quicksilver tonal shifts: This is one couple that can veer from post-coital bliss to brutal attacks within seconds."

Theatremania's David Finkle said: "Granted, Weller writes convincing dialogue for two smart and accomplished people who know each other so well they can quickly locate every pushable button. But convincing dialogue doesn't necessarily equate with a convincing play.... Fortunately, Marvel (who's eventually required to appear topless in an extended scene) is mesmerizing in her ability to resemble a tightly-wound spring tightening, and Butz, whose dancing skill in Dirty Rotten Scoundrels has clearly prepared him for a different kind of compelling choreography, is a couple dozen springs sprung from a confining box. If the situation Weller puts them in is only passingly realistic, their performances are so real that the audience's temptation to turn away from the pain is all but constant."

Bloomberg's John Simon said: "...this exhausting two-hander.... Why do two accomplished actors and one multitalented director -- Pendleton is also a fine actor and acting teacher -- go for this stuff? Because it lends itself to an unbridled display of acting and directing exercises."

THAT OTHER WOMAN'S CHILD: A BLUEGRASS MUSICAL

As part of the **New York Musical Theatre Festival**, I checked out **That Other Woman's Child**, as much for the subhead "a bluegrass musical" as any other reason, since I love bluegrass music and thought any show rooted in that genre would at least feature some nimble music. Not quite.

In this over-stuffed comic melodrama, the step-daughter of the man that dumped the family matriarch -- Granny Loomis -- has returned to town upon his death and everyone assumes this city woman (red-headed, no less) is out to stake her claim to the failing family farm. When the giant Knob extended family isn't terrorized by Granny, they're pushed around by the family preacher (Allan Ledford). There's also a daughter unhappily engaged to a brutish suitor, a son who wants to leave home and become a country singer and enough in-laws and outlaws to keep the tiny stage this show was performed on bursting at the seams.

All of this is played at the level of a skit on *Hee-Haw*. Listening to characters called Leviticus Numbers and Matthew Mark or Luke John or Corinthianne gets real old, real fast. Of course, *Hee-Haw* had lame jokes but it also had GREAT music. If this show had great music, too, no one would care about the straining plot. Unfortunately, the music is not up to *Hee-Haw* standards and rarely bluegrass to boot. (Throwing in a banjo doesn't mean a song is immediately bluegrass -- you need a jazzy, improvisatory feel to achieve that.)

The show ends with enough weddings to make Jane Austen seem miserly in comparison. And the large cast does its able best, helped along by choreography (Mark Knowles) and direction (Sherry Landrum, who also co-wrote the show with George S. Clinton) that deserves credit just for keeping folk from bumping into each other. But too many songs fall back on banal lyrics and the few that don't (such as the modestly clever "True Partners," which looks at couples from the Bible) are chained to flat melodies.

Only a few times does someone break out of the noisy story to hit a real emotional note. The perennially knocked-up Song of Solomon (yep, that's her name -- told you it gets old) sings "Honeysuckle" and in her one moment in the spotlight, Erin Parker delivers this tune with the high lonesome ache one associates with bluegrass. Later, tall glass of water and would-be singer Jimmy John (Quinn VanAntwerp, which has to be the least country name imaginable) delivers the fairly anonymous "Wings of Freedom" with a little bit of Elvis and then really scores with "All About Mama," a genuine (or if you prefer, "gen-u-wine") bit of country hokum that would indeed kill on

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