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Theater: Frank Langella Unforgettable In Forgettable Play

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THE FATHER ** out of ****

MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE

"And I can't forget, I can't forget
I can't forget but I don't remember what"
-- Leonard Cohen

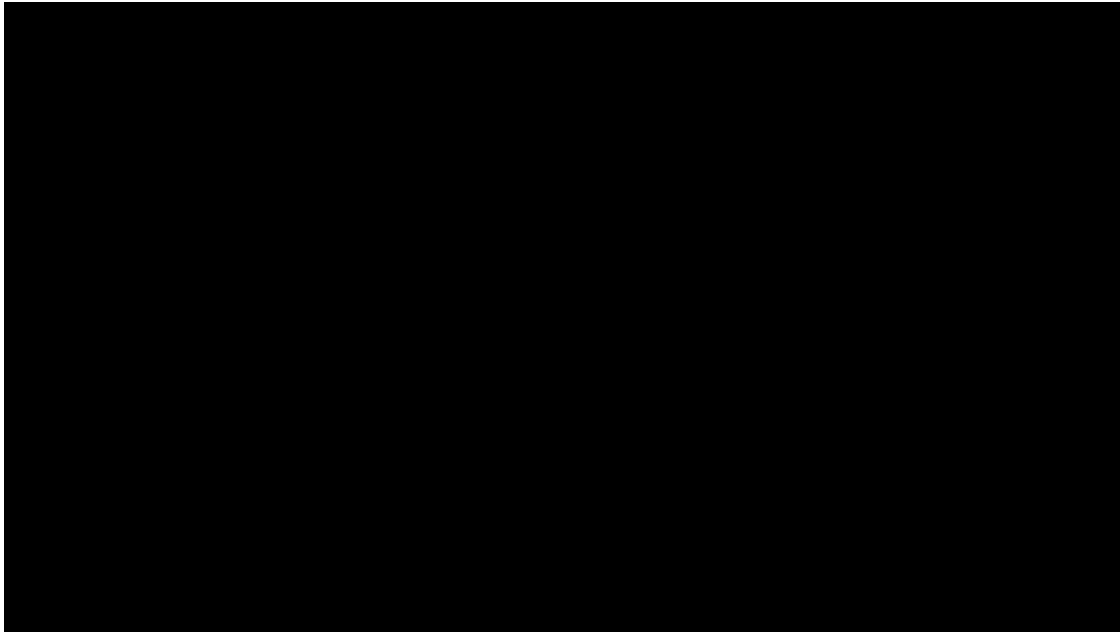
What must it be like to struggle with dementia, to feel your own mind betraying you, to live in a world that is inherently disorienting and scary and uncertain? It must be akin to finding yourself unexpectedly appearing in certain plays by Harold Pinter or Samuel Beckett, but a play that never ends and which you can never leave.

Florian Zeller clearly wondered about dementia and he has conjured up an elegantly simple way of illuminating that condition on stage. Quite simply, he has one character played by different actors or the same actor play different roles but without any attempt to change their appearance. Our hero is André (Frank Langella) and when an actress comes on stage as his daughter they talk. When she leaves and another actress appears, just like André we wonder, who is this? When she announces she's his daughter, confusion reigns.

And so it begins. Is this his daughter? Or is the other woman his daughter? Is the man sitting in his chair a stranger? His son-in-law? Is his daughter happily married? Divorced? Is she moving to London? Or is André moving into her home? And why do they keep raising the possibility of a nursing home? Is André being physically abused by someone tired of dealing with a petulant, confused old man? Or is André imagining it? Furniture comes and goes, paintings and posters line the walls or disappear, André was an engineer or perhaps a tap dancer or maybe not and it's all very confusing.

It's a simple and effective bit of stagecraft. It also comments nicely on theater-going since what do audiences do except try and piece together what is going on in just the way someone with dementia might? For what happens when an actor appears onstage? The audience naturally wonders who they are. Clues present themselves: their costume, how they speak, the way they address other characters. Are they a servant? A policeman? Do they address someone as "sir" or by their first name or as "Mr. Smith"? Thus do we piece together an identity for them. People with dementia must do this a dozen times a day, often masking for months or years the fact that they're uncertain of whom they're talking to, even if they see that person every single day.

Unfortunately, while Zeller captures the frightening existence of dementia, he didn't use that as a springboard for writing a play. You soon realize that *The Father* has this one idea animating it and nothing more. It's a small miracle that Langella wrings humor and pathos and genuine emotion out of this one-note scenario and indeed he does. But as accomplished as his work is, it's not enough to recommend the show.



The fundamental problem is the play itself. A certain forward momentum can be found. André is first seen in his home, moves in with his daughter since it's not safe for him to be on his own and inevitably winds up in a nursing home. That's hardly a spoiler since the end game is apparent from the first scene of the play. And we do note a certain decline in André, though frankly not very much. He's a witty urbane man who clearly suffers from dementia. He can be amusing, petty, angry and scared. He has trouble recognizing people of course and is stripped down emotionally towards the end to the point where this elderly man cries out for his mother. But most of this is evident from the start. This is emphatically not a play about a man recognizing the onslaught of dementia.

If the intent was to immerse us in the day to day experience of dementia, that fails utterly by the decision to have scenes in which André does not appear. At first, one wonders *why* we are seeing scenes between the daughter (Kathryn Erbe) and her husband/lover Pierre (Brian Avers). It seems to shatter the one interesting element of the play -- life as seen through the eyes of a man with dementia. But perhaps the drama will come from watching the daughter slowly realize and accept what is happening to her father, that this proud and intelligent man simply doesn't recognize her and can't survive on his own?

No, the play doesn't try for this either. In an inexplicable choice (perhaps to avoid tiresome repetition?), Zeller avoids anyone stating the obvious, that André has dementia. Putting him in a home, the danger he might be to himself and others, his inability to function is all clearly on the table for the daughter almost from the moment the play begins. If she must grapple with accepting he has dementia, we don't really see it. So where is the

drama? Like so many people, she hesitates in taking that final step and then takes it when her options run out.

Worse, we spend the entire play hearing people speak idiotically to André long after they know he has dementia. "Don't you remember?" "I've told you this." And so on. Yes, family and friends slip up. But even care-givers at a nursing home right at the end of the play say stupid things over and over like, "Don't you remember?" Perhaps it's meant to be the world as seen from André's eyes? Nonetheless, it seems absurd to turn dementia into the disease that dare not speak its name and no purpose is served by having even professionals consistently talk in a way that beggars belief.

Beyond Langella, the acting is difficult to judge. Avers is especially broad as Pierre, but it's possible his performance is meant to be broad, to reflect the cartoon-ish way André sees him. Everyone else is fine though their characters are so one-note and without growth that they're given little to do. Still, Hannah Cabell and Kathleen McNenny fare the best. Notably, they have relatively smaller parts while the more Erbe and Avers must wrestle with static roles the less successful they are.

Langella is marvelous, giving an arc to his character far beyond what the text provides or deserves. He's very funny and pointed when mocking a caregiver for speaking to him as if he's a child. His abrupt switches from amusing to cruel or scared to furious are marvelous and recognizable to anyone who has dealt with a loved one suffering from dementia. The scene where he questions a man about the watch on his wrist is just one of many where Langella mines the modest material for all it's worth.

Even the particular look of this production undermines the experience. Scott Pask's set is perhaps appropriately anonymous and the original music and sound design of Fitz Patton has an elegant air. But Zeller's script has some inexplicable scene breaks. And they're accompanied by a blackout punctuated by the lighting design of Donald Holder that includes ugly and clunky white lights along the frame of the stage that burst into action like a video game or bad sci-fi movie. They seem designed to blind the audience and disorient us, I suppose, but all they really do is annoy.

Are they meant to reflect the workings of the brain, the firing of synapses perhaps? If so, they don't seem to grow more frantic or sporadic and sluggish as the show goes on. They don't symbolize the breakdown of André's brain. They are simply static and unchanging, much like the dramatics of the show itself. The set may slowly be stripped of this piece of furniture and that bit artwork on the wall but it can't disguise the fact that nothing much is happening after all.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise ***

Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2

Something Rotten ***

Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

Broadway & The Bard * 1/2
Prodigal Son **
A Bronx Tale: The Musical **
Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **
Nice Fish ***
Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***
Hughie **
Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2
Straight ** 1/2
Eclipsed ***
Red Speedo ***
The Royale ** 1/2
Boy ****
The Robber Bridegroom ***
Hold On To Me, Darling ***
Blackbird ** 1/2
Disaster! *
The Effect ** 1/2
Dry Powder ** 1/2
Head Of Passes ** 1/2
Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2
The Crucible (w Ben Whishaw) ***
Bright Star **
She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***
Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2
RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2
RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***
RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2
Nathan The Wise ** 1/2
The Father **

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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.*

