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Theater: Gillian Anderson Takes A Whirl On "Streetcar;" Modest "Tuck"

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A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE *** out of ****

TUCK EVERLASTING ** out of ****

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ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE

"Did she jump or was she pushed?"

-- Richard and Linda Thompson

Blanche DuBois comes tottering into view. The petite Gillian Anderson is precariously balanced on high heels, for this Blanche is never quite sure of her footing. Almost always well put together, she shows up unexpectedly at her sister's home in the French Quarter of New Orleans, a seedy neighborhood in which men wallop their wives when not brawling with their pals over a poker game. This is not her world and Blanche's clothes and manner are out of place.

Not foolishly out of place, though, as the heroine of this Tennessee Williams tragedy is often played. This Blanche is not transparently broken down or pathetic or just plain nuts. Once upon a time, we understand, she was a thoroughbred with potential. Now she's found herself on muddy ground, precarious footing where one wrong move would send her tumbling down -- a quick snap and a broken leg and the race will be over for her.

So she steps cautiously, carefully and then with a little more confidence. Yes, this Blanche is down. Yes, she is desperate. Yes, she needs a man, any man. But how tough can the competition be, here at a fifth rate track where the only rivals are prostitutes and broken down nags? At the end of the play, you will see Blanche wobble again and worse than ever, her ankles so flimsy and weak it's a miracle she is standing at all. She'll be paraded around the audience like a horse before auction, her eyes wild with fear and confusion. And it's a miracle she's standing at all. It's not a victory lap, not by any stretch. But the mere fact that you feel pity rather than revulsion or contempt says something for this Blanche.

It's is one of the greatest roles in the theater, so no wonder I began with Blanche. But the strength of this revival is that it's not just the Blanche DuBois Show. Nor is it merely a boxing match between her and Stanley Kowalski, with the rest of the cast as referee or spectators. Instead this revival by director Benedict Andrews -

- first mounted at the Young Vic -- creates a genuine balance between the four leads and the play is richer for it. Blanche's sister is Stella (Vanessa Kirby) and here I felt her pain more than usual. The ache of loneliness that defines Mitch (Corey Johnson) also came across. It helps that Ben Foster plays Stanley as a real person and not a scenery chewing brute. He avoids the shadow of Marlon Brando by simply embodying the man on the page. Easier said than done, but he makes it look easy.

So full credit to the cast. But is it just a coincidence that my perspective on this play was ever-changing when my *literal* perspective on the play was ever-changing as well? The one staging gimmick I knew about was the rotating set. For almost the entire evening, the set turns. The audience is seated in the round and the set rotates, sometimes slowly, sometimes fast but almost always perceptibly. Sometimes you're looking at Stanley staring quietly in a bathroom mirror while dialogue is being delivered on the other side of the room.

Interestingly, this conceit is never dull or annoying. You don't for a moment feel you're being cheated or missing out on the action. Naturally, a strong cast is key to this. But it's so successful here that one can't help feeling it might be a much richer vein than its stunt-like nature might suggest. Of course most venues can't even attempt this, but still. As with John Doyle's approach to musicals (where the actors play the instruments), it might well prove true this staging will pay dividends for other shows down the road.



PHOTO BY TEDDY WOLFF

So the main approach of this revival pays off in spades and the cast is strong. We get a strong take on the story: a Blanche that is damaged goods perhaps but not broken. She disrupts the home life of her sister, a life that is far from even the faded glamour of their once proud Southern family. But Blanche needs another chance and just might find it in Stanley's pal Mitch, a momma's boy who longs for true love almost as much as Blanche longs to be treated like a lady once again. Yet she shows her hand too soon, flirting with Stanley too abruptly. He recoils from her grasp like a child that touches a red-hot stove. Stanley then breaks Stella, digging up the dirt on her past, destroying her last chance at respectability and then assaulting her at her

weakest. We see her mind snap for good when Mitch rejects her. Stanley's assault may be the final cruel indignity, but at that point it's more like necrophilia than rape.

This production is more nuanced of course than that flat description. But it has a purpose and focus thanks to the cast. Unfortunately, it doesn't triumph as it might because numerous other touches by the director fall flat. Most notable is the intrusive sound design and questionable use of music. They try almost everything, to a fault: new music, a classic jazzy New Orleans vibe, discordant sound and then modern songs played at epic volume including everything from PJ Harvey's "To Bring You My Love" (which works fabulously) to Cat Power at the end. Perhaps any one approach might have worked but the kitchen sink nature of trying everything calls too much attention to itself.

It's especially bad when they toss in Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game." Where to begin? The sentiment is too nail on the head, really, and only works if you think of it from Mitch's perspective. But does it capture him? "Oh I don't wanna fall in love with you" sings Isaak in the beautifully dreamy classic. But Mitch *does* want to fall in love, desperately so and especially with someone like Blanche or at least the someone he imagines this Blanche to be. The song is too slick, too knowing, too cosmopolitan for the blue collar Mitch anyway. And it's played at full volume for minutes so there's no escaping it. Ultimately, even the tunes that work feel too clever by half.

That rotating set? It almost never calls attention to itself; after a few minutes you just accept it and indeed revel in it. But the use of music and abrupt violent sound? It should seem as natural as breathing to hear music in New Orleans but instead it horns in on your emotions, calling attention to what you were already feeling and spoiling the mood.

The costumes ultimately do the same. For most of the show, Blanche has been notably well-put together. She may prefer low lighting, but she looks pretty damn good in any situation. Suddenly, just as her mind is about to betray her for good, Anderson is saddled with an absurd red party dress, frilly and awful and topped off by a ridiculous red bow in Blanche's hair. It's foolish looking and the sort of thing this Blanche would have ditched ages ago (or never bought in the first place). Instead of telegraphing her disintegration, it lampoons it. This is followed by an equally silly pink affair moments later. Like the music, just when we're ready to ache for this Blanche, the clothes beat us to the punch.

That's a pity since they had four leads poised for greatness. Most of the smaller parts don't really register, though Otto Farrant nicely underplays the humor as the young man Blanche flirts with when he comes to collect newspaper money. Corey Johnson as Mitch is a nice schlub, not just a patsy for Blanche's machinations. Vanessa Kirby is more rounded than most Stellas I've seen, fully aware and wary of her sister but ready to ignore ugly truths and easily prone to falling into the role of younger sibling.

Ben Foster seemed...small to me, too slight a person to play Stanley. Or so I thought. But he is fully convincing as an actual person, rather than doing a spin on what Brando did already. His Stanley might have made a better case for having to reveal the truth about Blanche's past. But Stanley isn't interested in making the best defense for his actions; he just wants this woman out of his home and out of his life. He doesn't need to kick her down after he's won, but you're not that surprised when he does. Is Blanche broken or does Stanley break her? Is she insane or driven mad? As always, she's teetering on the edge but this Stanley gives her a purposeful push.

And Anderson has shown for many years she's a terrific actress with great taste, making the most of the fame she achieved from *The X-Files* with one smart choice after another. Her Blanche is not a fluttery Southern belle but the sort of woman who once navigated parties and bars with ease. For the first time, the story of Blanche's marriage to a closeted suicidal man felt painful to me, rather than florid melodrama that explains away her disintegration. At the end, she's paraded in front of the audience and her startled gaze reveals that Blanche senses but can't quite grasp that she's not headed for the auction block. She's headed for the slaughterhouse.

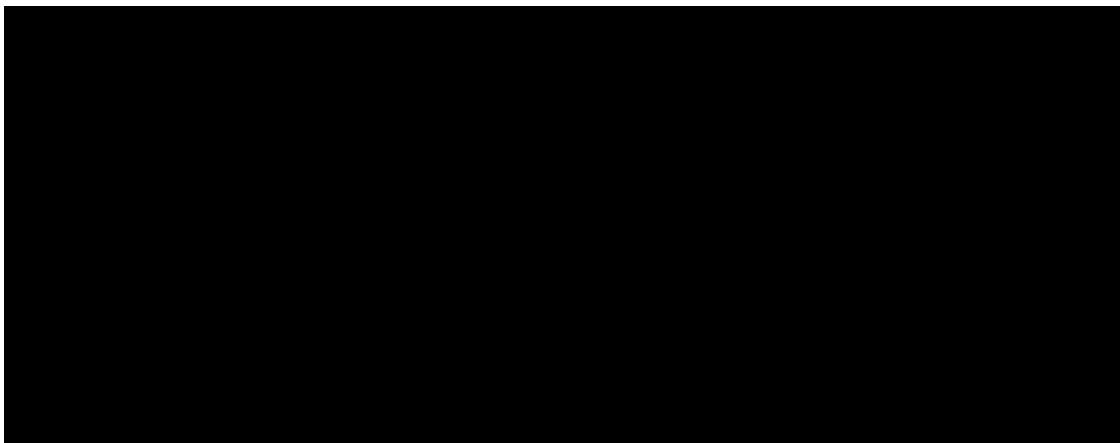
TUCK EVERLASTING ** out of ****
BROADHURST THEATRE


Natalie Babbitt's quietly dark novel *Tuck Everlasting* plays off the oldest wish around: what if you could live forever? And why, my guest wondered, does every fairy tale, every movie, every work of imagination almost always suggest that living forever would be a curse? It's true. You almost never find a sci-fi novel where never having to die is a lark. Perhaps it's because we *can't* live forever. Since we're stuck with death, we comfort ourselves by insisting that even if we could live forever, it would be a dreadful thing indeed. Our terrible fate is in fact a blessing. Or so the stories and songs insist. Me, I'd be willing to risk it.

But what about Winnie Foster? She's just 11 years old and her father has died. She can't think of anything bad about people living forever, not if it meant her dad was still here to play with her and brighten her day. Of course, when you're eleven you almost feel like you *will* live forever, since 12 seems awfully far away and 17 even farther and being 20 or 30 or 40 years old pretty much unimaginable.

Maybe that's why Winnie doesn't seem particularly bowled over when she meets a strange family that claims they are immortal. It starts when Winnie befriends Jesse Tuck in the woods. She doesn't like it when he orders her not to drink from a spring found behind her house. Sure, he's a lot older (maybe 17) but it's her woods after all. Desperate, Jesse explains that the spring is magical and has turned his entire family immortal. Before you can blink, they've kidnapped Winnie, taken her to their hidden cabin and explained their sad, strange predicament.

Well, not so sad to Jesse who looks 17 but is really more like 117 and yet has a zest for life the rest of his family lacks. He and Winnie have some fun adventures playing in the woods and going to the fair and Jesse has a plan. He's revealed their secret and entrusted Winnie with some of the magical water. Wait until you're 17 years old, he says, and awfully sure. Then, if you want, drink the water. I'll find you and we'll explore the world, always young and happy and with all the time to do whatever we want.





That's about it for this modest little musical that slips past almost before it's begun. The novel was turned into a modestly successful movie in 2002 but worked better as a book. The same is true here, for most of the drama takes place when we're not around. The Tuck family realizes immortality is more of a curse than a dream. But that doesn't really get addressed until Jesse's older brother Miles (the handsome Robert Lenzi) sings the show's best number, "Time." Until then, we mostly see Winnie and Jesse enjoying innocent horseplay or Winnie being treated kindly by the Tuck parents.

The mild villain on display is the Man In The Yellow Suit (Terrence Mann). His grandmother told him rumors of a family that lived forever and he's been hunting them most of his life. He'd love to know their secret -- not because he yearns for immortality as such but simply because he wants to get rich. The economical book of Claudia Shear and Tim Federle cleans up Babbitt's convoluted plot but the darkness that might have made this story more compelling is cleaned up too.

The pain of watching loved ones grow old and die while you go on? That takes place off stage and the Tucks rarely address it. Winnie's struggle over whether to live forever or just *live*? Dismissed in an instant. Jesse's bittersweet realization he's lost a final chance at love and that perhaps it was for the best? Condensed to a brief unspoken moment.

Ultimately, the show's most ambitious moment comes after all the drama has happened. Winnie chooses to grow up and grow old...and in an extended dance sequence choreographed by director Casey Nicholaw we see just that. We see Winnie grow up and get romanced and marry and lose more loved ones and have children and see them grow and on and on. It's not the equal of the ballet in *Oklahoma!* of course (what is?) but it's a welcome and unexpected burst of originality at the end of a very conventional and straightforward show. It may well be what drew Nicholaw to the story in the first place and no wonder.

Before that, it's mostly a simple story told through some decent if not memorable songs by Chris Miller and Nathan Tysen. What pleasure there is to be found before that final dance number comes from the cast. Carolee Carmelo and Michael Park exude decency as the Tuck parents while Lenzi charms as the older Tuck son. They're simply not given the material to shade these characters with the genuine sadness they need to be more than stock figures. Mann is the Man In The Yellow Suit but it's a toothless and forgettable villain for the most part.

In secondary roles, Fred Applegate and Michael Wartella score strongly as Constable Joe and his son Hugo. Applegate is a pro and brings gentle humor to very familiar schtick while Wartella is sweetly quirky as the budding detective at his side. Ideally, they would be an added pleasure to the show rather than the main

triumphs.

One certainly wouldn't fault the leads. Young Sarah Charles Lewis holds center stage ably as Winnie. It's not her fault that this character has no great dilemma to wrestle with. Andrew Keenan-Bolger is equally appealing as Jesse Tuck. It's not clear why Jesse maintains his love of life when the rest of his family feels beaten down. You just accept his irrepressible nature and never for a moment feel any queasiness about the old man trapped in a young body who sees Winnie as the (future) love of his life. His attraction is simply taken as sweetly as it's meant and Keenan-Bolger is a key reason why. If he'd been given the chance to seem more dangerous or reckless or heartbroken or simply explain why Jesse has managed to remain joyful despite the burden of living forever, Keenan-Bolger would have delivered. But this musical too often glides by the dark questions at the heart of the story.

Babbitt's novel deserves to be called a classic. It was first published in 1975, has been turned into a film twice and now a musical. It sells and sells, though I prefer *The Devil's Storybook* and some other titles of hers more. Still, the simple, alluring appeal of *Tuck Everlasting* is easy to understand. And given the fact that the book has flourished for 40 years and counting, it's safe to say Babbitt's name will be remembered for a very long time to come. That's not literal immortality, but it's an awfully good start.

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 Wishaw) ***
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 **
American Psycho **
Waitress ** 1/2
Fully Committed ** 1/2
Long Day's Journey Into Night ***
A Streetcar Named Desire ***
Tuck Everlasting **

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