

# Theater: Gripping "Humans," Dog-tired "Sylvia," Silly "Dames At Sea," Awkward "Ripcord"

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**THE HUMANS** \*\*\* ½ out of \*\*\*\*

**SYLVIA** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**DAMES AT SEA** \*\* ½ out of \*\*\*\*

**RIPCORD** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

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**ROUNABOUT AT LAURA PELS THEATRE**

Stephen Karam's new play is one cliché after another. I have a friend - a smart, savvy theater-goer - who didn't buy tickets for it because the mere description of *The Humans* bored him. And no wonder: a family gathering (Thanksgiving, in this case), petty grievances, old grudges brought forth, revelations of a personal nature (jobs and hearts lost or won) and so on. Sigh. The difference? Somehow Karam's play brings these terribly familiar events to specific and engrossing life.

It helps that he's been given a flawless production by director Joe Mantello and an excellent cast. I for one think *Sons Of The Prophet* is a better play. But with three shows under his belt - *The Humans*, *Sons Of The Prophet* and *Speech & Debate* - what a great situation to be in. We're not arguing about which play is good; we're arguing about which play is better. If *The Humans* strives for a zeitgeist-y aura of significance it doesn't quite earn, at least it comes very close. I can imagine a lesser production down the road revealing some of those modest weaknesses...and it's good enough now to know those productions will surely be coming.

Brigid (Sarah Steele) and her boyfriend Richard (Arian Moayed) have just moved into their ground floor Chinatown apartment, very much a starter place with its noisy neighbors, cigarette-filled alley and dicey electricity. Nonetheless, Brigid's family has tramped into the city for Thanksgiving: mom (Jayne Houdyshell, tremendously good), dad (Reed Birney, ditto), Aimee nursing a heartache over breaking up with her girlfriend (Cassie Beck) and the grandmother Momo who has spiraled away into dementia (Lauren Klein).

The jokes they make, the stories they tell, even the revelations they offer are not amped up or shocking in any way: they are, perhaps, shocking only in their mundane nature. But for 95 minutes that feels much longer than that (in a good way), the interplay of these characters is tense, funny, and absorbing. The mini-alliances, the sparks of humor between siblings or the big sister playfully making the new boyfriend feel part of the family, the father and young man uneasily sharing a moment as they politely make nice is all riveting.

Karam's dialogue is somehow fresh and specific and the cast makes the most of it. Praise them all but the parents stick in your mind. Birney is marvelous as the father burdened with financial woes and the need to share bad news with his daughters without wanting them to feel burdened or - worse - think less of him as a provider and father and husband. But Houdyshell is just sensational as well, taking in a cutting comment from one daughter with aggrieved silence, offering an opinion to another even when she knows it will be looked down upon dismissively as only a child can look down on their parent. (What do you do when you've succeeded by raising kids who are smarter than you and won't let you forget it even if they could?) The love is never

questioned but *The Humans* makes clear no one can wound you quite like family.

And none of this captures the eerie vibe Karam is striving for and sometimes succeeds at. The play begins in silence with Birney suspended in silence in this strange, gray, rundown apartment. The lights come on ominously and for a moment one thinks of a horror film. That's no accident. Birney's dad is plagued by bad dreams and so is Richard. Financial woes press down on most all of them, with dreams shattered or delayed almost across the board. Richard actually comes from wealth and will receive a trust fund inheritance when he's 40, a detail that irks the dad. Thunderous noises keep coming from the upstairs neighbor, at first just annoying but ultimately sounding more like the Four Horsemen Of The Apocalypse. Future productions will undoubtedly have this grim cubicle of an apartment disintegrating before our eyes once the distressing climax is reached.

That's all part of the Significance that is so loudly announced by the end. It's a small fly in the ointment for a show that is fundamentally strong and making a welcome transfer to Broadway where a playwright of Karam's talents clearly belongs. Mantello does him right with this pitch-perfect world premiere and kudos all around to the technical team he oversaw so well (David Zinn's depressingly believable set, Sarah Laux's spot-on costumes, Justin Townsend's purposefully fickle lighting and Fitz Patton's essential sound design). They give Karam's vision the portent of doom his play called for without overburdening it too much. It's a very good play for the 99%, even if it's not 100% perfect.

## **SYLVIA** \*\* out of \*\*\*\* **CORT THEATRE**

It's not a dog. And dog lovers will surely enjoy the anthropomorphic romping of Annaleigh Ashford as the titular canine. But the return of the comedy *Sylvia* seems to confirm it's an excellent showcase for a young actress but a poor showcase for playwright A.R. Gurney.

Greg (Matthew Broderick) is a middle-aged man at a crossroads in life. His kids have gone off to college, he and his wife have moved into Manhattan and his job in finance seems increasingly unfulfilling if not downright pointless. Enter *Sylvia* (Ashford), a dog on the loose with a collar announcing her name but no way to find an owner. Greg is smitten - he needs something to love, after all - and takes *Sylvia* home, much to the dismay of his wife Kate (Julie White). *Sylvia* bounds all over the furniture, talks to everyone, sniffs everything and generally makes herself at home as Kate very unhappily agrees to a trial period of just a few days. Ha!

Kate is launching a new career, bringing Shakespeare to the "urban" kids (i.e. poor black and brown kids, one assumes). Greg meanwhile is fighting repeatedly with his boss, refuses to take assignments and keeps taking off more and more time to wander Central Park and even the city at all hours of the day and night. Desperate, Kate snags a prestigious grant (aren't all grants prestigious?) to head to London for six months and wants them to go together. Dogs are quarantined for precisely six months before being allowed to come into the UK so Greg must choose: *Sylvia* or his wife? It won't be an easy decision.

The show is almost too frivolous to describe. The work tensions, the strain on their marriage and so forth imply a weightiness that *Sylvia* simply doesn't reach for and certainly doesn't attain. About the only pleasure to be garnered here is the silly interactions between Ashford and the rest of the cast. She has fun freaking out and cursing up a storm when spotting a cat. And the show's high point is certainly the slapstick scene where *Sylvia* keeps sniffing the crotch of Kate's friend Phyllis (played amusingly by Robert Sella - in one of three good roles -- sporting a sensationally funny wig by Campbell Young Associates).

But that scene has a broad farce nature completely out of sorts with the rest of the show. Broderick, an actor I love who has been distressingly stuck on a low simmer for years now, perks up a bit in a part that might have been written for him. But he's still very low-key, with the usually ebullient Julie White even tamer in a role that offers little for her to dig into. They barely seem to exist together, much less seem married. Indeed, all four actors appear to be acting in different shows. (When Julie's friend shows up, the dialogue is so confusing, I

thought it was a flashback for a while. The fact that it felt so different from everything that came before or since didn't help.)

And none of the travails besetting this Manhattan couple make a moment's sense. We're led up to a big decision and yet when it comes, we don't quite believe it when it comes because up until that second we have no reason to believe it's the best choice for Greg or one that he'd make. Then in a head-spinning bit of confusion, several things happen. Sylvia lays the blame at Kate in a speech that makes absolutely no sense, Kate has a revelation or realization or something (one I didn't even grasp had happened at first since it too makes no sense) and then we're told in a pointless epilogue to ignore the last ten minutes of the show because that isn't what happened after all.

What you get at the end is a little pile of doo-doo. Just pretend to ignore and step around that little mess of a finale on your way out. Of course little messes are one of the complications you accept when bringing a dog into your life (and Ashford certainly makes a cute one). They're fun and playful and then keep wanting to play long after you've lost interest.

### **DAMES AT SEA** \*\* ½ out of \*\*\*\* **HELEN HAYES THEATRE**

I'm sure producers would prefer we not discuss ticket prices or Broadway versus Off Broadway - just review the show, damnit. But context is everything. Some movies work better as TV shows. Some novels should be trilogies and some trilogies should have stayed short stories. Some shows belong Off Broadway. And some deserve a big splashy Broadway debut.

I'll bet the musical Dames At Sea deserves both of these things. Watch the new revival and you'll surely understand how a rinky-dink production with two pianos and a lot of heart played Off Broadway for ages. You'll also understand why the folks who loved it thought it could live up to a fuller production with some honest-to-goodness sets, a (smallish) orchestra and a game six member cast.

The whole nutty story is a genial tribute (NOT send-up, not really) to those silly musicals of the 1930s where a small-town girl arrives in the big city with dreams of making it on Broadway and by golly gets the guy and the spotlight all in one madcap whirl! In a twist that's wonderfully delicious, the original modest 50-minute production debuted in a coffeehouse in Greenwich Village in 1966. The original lead for that kid-who-becomes-a-star show dropped out and 18-year-old Bernadette Peters took over. A star was literally born!

Now after productions all over the world, this harmless nonsense makes its Broadway debut. It would be a sure-fire thing Off Broadway if Off Broadway still made financial sense anymore (too often, it doesn't). Director and choreographer Randy Skinner kept tap dancing uppermost when casting as he made sure one and all could dance with aplomb. Success! The dancing is fun and energetic and satisfying.

That leaves the singing and acting. As two sailors, Cary Tedder and Danny Garnder are amiable fellas. Tedder plays Dick, a sailor with a seachest brimming over with terrific tunes. Sure he's wowed when the big Broadway star Mona Kent (a very fun Lesli Margherita) showers him with attention. But Ruby (Eloise Kropp), the new girl who went straight from the bus station into the chorus line of that promising new musical Dames At Sea is his one and only and don't you doubt it. Tedder and Garnder (who plays Lucky, a sailor dating a chorus girl named Joan) are not great in the vocals department but these guys have charm. John Bolton on the other hand is top-notch as both the determined director Hennessey and the easily swayed Captain who has a battleship that would make a swell home for their suddenly adrift show.

The real stars are the supporting women. Margherita (what a name!) has fun with the opener but really goes to town with her diva-like take on Dick's original song "That Mister Man Of Mine." She stops the show with her hijinks and delivers her one-liners with aplomb. So does Mari Davi as the seen-it-all chorus girl Joan. Davi

follows up Margherita's big number with her own show-stopper, the vocally impressive, downright wonderful "Good Times Are Here To Stay," plus a fun "Choo-Choo Honeymoon" with her man. The sweet book and lyrics are by George Haimsohn and Robin Miller, with period-perfect music by Jim Wise.

Unfortunately, that's the first act. It's downhill from there, if never less than amusing. One misfire earlier is "Singapore Sue." The show has been a knowing spoof all along and a vaguely Asian-themed number makes sense for those insensitive times. Yet it's supposed to be a marvelous showcase for the big star Mona, one she insists get put into the musical. Yet it's really a song for a male performer; a quibble, but it throws one off.

More to the point, the two supporting actresses are terrific and completely overshadow Eloise Kropp as Ruby. Her vocals in particular are notably weak. You spend her big numbers hoping she'll get through them, not thinking "a star is born!" It's hardly fair to say she's no Bernadette Peters, of course. Her dancing is good and she's appealing if never the center of attention she should be. (You're always anticipating the other gals more.) The role demands a triple threat, not a double threat, especially with her appearing in virtually every song in the second act (often as the lead singer). We're forced to think less and less of Ruby's chances just as we should be cheering her on. It's a Dames At Sea with no star to steer by.

With five dollar sets and this same cast it would deserve to have a long and healthy run Off Broadway where modest prices could make audiences feel they were in on the fun, discovering a show rather than paying top dollar for what they expect to be a luxury cruise liner. On Broadway, I fear the feet-first casting of Skinner has sunk this ship before it sailed.

**RIPCORD** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT NY CITY CENTER**

Having just seen the disappointing Pulitzer Prize winner *The Gin Game* (a rickety, unsatisfying play that barely serves as a decent star vehicle), I was both wary of and excited by *Ripcord*. It's about two retired women angling over rights to the best bed in the best room at their nursing home. A showcase for two actors sporting both Holland Taylor and Marylouise Burke? Bring it on! Show 'em how it's done, ladies.

Well they do, even if playwright David Lindsay-Abaire doesn't. To be fair, this is no attempt to write some middlebrow, well-constructed vehicle. It's a lot weirder than that. David Hyde Pierce directs it with flair moment to moment (he certainly knows how to get laughs). But he needed to be firmer with Lindsay-Abaire and demand one or two or ten more drafts.

Quite simply, Abby Binder (Taylor) is not likable. She doesn't want to be likable. And she enjoys her privacy. While she can't afford a private room, the fact is that she's had a double with an unoccupied second bed for quite a while. Abby likes to think it's because the last director of the nursing home appreciated her. When the nursing home employee Scotty (Nate Miller) finally reveals it was just because no one wanted to live with her, well we're hardly surprised.

In any case, times have changed. The nursing home has a new director and Abby has a new roommate, when she just wants to read her books in peace. Marilyn (Burke) seems blissfully oblivious to Abby's scathing nature. Marilyn talks from morning to night. Marilyn does Sudoku to keep her brain limber. Marilyn is relentlessly cheerful. And Marilyn is awfully admiring of the bed by the window, which gets more sun....

A genial bettor about pretty much everything, Marilyn suddenly stumbles into a real wager when she insists she never gets angry while Abby insists she never gets scared. A light bulb goes off and Abby proposes a bet: she'll try to get Marilyn angry and Marilyn will try to scare her first. If Abby wins, Marilyn vacates the room. If Marilyn wins, they switch beds.

You can take it from there. They'll pull increasingly elaborate pranks on one another. Either the pranks grow and grow into cons worthy of *The Sting*. Or perhaps they'll become more personal and cutting as these two women

bond over their rivalry and - who knows - become a little closer.

All of this and none of it happen in a show that goes off the rails dramatically and never regains its footing. The cast sells it scene by scene and you can't really feel cheated when getting to watch Taylor and Burke go toe to toe. But the structure of Lindsay-Abaire's showdown is almost perplexingly wrongheaded.

First, before the bet even gets underway, the two women attend a local Halloween haunted mansion in which Scotty is working as an actor. It's intended to set up the idea that Abby refuses to admit she gets scared (and in a throw-away bit hint that Abby is not the cold monster she pretends). But this Haunted Mansion segment goes on and on and on. The show is mostly set in that one room of their retirement home. But here we get scene after scene: they trudge from one silly "scary moment" (like a man getting electrocuted) to another and another. And another.

They're just repetitive and they go on and on and serve absolutely no purpose. (Remember, this is before the bet has even been made.) How and why this hugely elaborate segment wasn't cut remains puzzling. Cut this and the interval and you'd have an intermission-free show that could build and build to a climax the way such a series of escalating pranks should.

Then come two pranks on top of each other. One is modest and the other so elaborate and over-the-top and frankly unbelievable that it feels more like the climax to a very different show. It seems like the prank that might come right before the finale. True, the show raises the stakes with more personal pranks after that, ones that cut to the core. But the surreal, nutty nature of that first prank by Marilyn is so outrageous that everything she does after it is both predictable and anti-climactic.

In a misjudgment of an entirely different nature, Abby unearths distressingly painful information about Marilyn...and broadcasts it to the entire retirement home. Now Abby wants to be seen as indifferent to others but she's hardly a monster. What she does is simply cruel. That would be fine if it led to us seeing her in a different light. (Maybe she really is cruel.) Or it would work if Marilyn raised the stakes as well. That doesn't really happen, though the playwright might think it does. Even worse, those details she uncovers remain essentially a throwaway, a rather callous use of such plot info for mere momentary effect.

Glenn Fitzgerald pops in with several small parts and one juicy scene with Taylor, that is gripping and dramatic. It's always a pleasure to see him onstage and he and Taylor are marvelous, but it feels like a scene from a very different show, seeming to almost exist outside the rest of this mostly larky comedy.

For all its scattershot nature, Ripcord ends in a very predictable fashion that one expects, given the pranks that have come before. Lindsay-Abaire had about seven different directions he could have taken this play in. Unfortunately, he took them all.

## THEATER OF 2015

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[Let The Right One In](#) \*\*

Da no rating

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