

Theater: Hard To "Describe The Night," Fun "Pride And Prejudice," Boring "Parisian Woman,"



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Theater: Hard To "Describe The Night," Fun "Pride And Prejudice," Boring "Parisian Woman," Pretty Nice "Island"

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DESCRIBE THE NIGHT ** out of ****

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE *** out of ****

THE PARISIAN WOMAN * out of ****

ONCE ON THIS ISLAND ** out of ****

DESCRIBE THE NIGHT ** out of ****

ATLANTIC THEATER COMPANY

How to describe *Describe The Night*? A friend saw the show before me and said simply, "It's three hours long and *very* ambitious." That was not meant as a compliment. Really, that about sums it up though I was so prepared for a three hour length and a lot of ambition that I was able to enjoy the performances more than I might have otherwise. Playwright Rajiv Joseph is a frustrating sort, always letting his head getting in the way of his heart. *Benghal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo*, *Gruesome Playground Injuries* and *Describe The Night* all feel like intellectual exercises more than stories, The magic that makes shows you might compare this to — inevitably *Angels In America* — actually good simply isn't there. These aren't characters, just conceits. It's not conceited of Joseph to tackle big themes and a broad canvas. But the day the characters are more important than the concept is the day he might deliver a genuinely good play.

Here we have 90 years of history, from Poland in World War I to Russia and Germany and back to Poland again in 2010. Everyone from the writer Isaac Babel to Vladimir Putin make an appearance, all in a way that mingles history with fantasy and conspiracy theory in a thick, sometimes hearty stew. Babel (Danny Burstein) is a soldier in the war to end all wars when he is befriended by his polar opposite: a brutal, unimaginative figure named Nikolai (Zach Grenier). Nikola is suspicious of literature but gobsmacked by Babel's ability to spin lie after lie. Facts may be malleable but they are facts damnit! Yes, Comrade Stalin may change the facts

tomorrow but then Nikolai will hold tightly to the new facts as completely as he did to the old ones. Nonetheless they become friends even as Nikolai becomes a fearsome figure in secret police while Babel becomes a controversial literary figure having an affair with Nikolai's wife.

Oh, there is much much more, including the real plane crash of Polish officials in 2010, Putin, Nikolai and his wife living to be more than 100 years old each, soup made of leeches, love, bitterness, regret, torture, debate and the lies we tell to reach the truth and the lies we tell to hide it. Ambitious? oh yes.



PRODUCTION PHOTOS BY AHRON R. FOSTER.
Danny Burstein and Zach Grenier

You won't believe a word of it. That's not actually a criticism, not with Grenier pulling on and off a very artificial beard when he's playing Nikolai as a (very) old man or his younger self. It's just not the sort of show where realism or a sense of being caught up in the story is the goal. It's a dark fable about the ways we deceive ourselves but sadly it is simply a jumble of ideas and arguments. Oh there's plot for miles but it doesn't stay with you. In one scene, characters eat a soup of leeches that purportedly allows you to remember some memory you lost. That's exactly what one would need to do to reconstruct this story. A guy in a car rental place helps a reporter escape from the police. Oh and there he is again at the end finding respite in a laundromat? Sure, why not.

Most of the female roles are weak, but Tina Benko does the most with Nikolai's wife, slipping easily from a young appealing woman to a bent over figure of ancient years. The men fare better in the masculine world depicted, from Max Gordon Moore suitably enigmatic as Putin to Stephen Stocking, who has very little to do but does it handsomely. It's a weird compliment to say that Burstein and Grenier do not score memorably. They're excellent actors so this fault lies solely with Joseph. When actors of their skill don't linger in the memory, the evening is frankly depressing. How to describe *Describe The Night*? It's three hours long and very

ambitious.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE *** out of ****

PRIMARY STAGES

Writer and actor Kate Hamill is working her way through the Jane Austen canon and more power to her. With Bedlam, she wrote and starred in *Sense and Sensibility*, a highlight just a year or two ago (depending on when you saw it). Now at Primary Stages she has adapted and stars in a *Pride and Prejudice* that is less scintillating but still fun. Surely *Emma* and *Persuasion* and the rest aren't far behind. I just hope those lesser works inspire greater precision.

We've already enjoyed a number of brilliant adaptations of *Pride and Prejudice*. The TV miniseries is my favorite, a landmark from 1995 starring Jennifer Ehle and Colin Firth. The peerless 1940 film version does almost as well in two hours. (Having Greer Garson and Laurence Olivier on tap helps in that regard.) But most stage adaptations haven't come close to the novel's greatness and this light spin is no exception. Hamill deftly allows actors to play multiple roles, mines the humor of Austen quite effectively, underlines the graver concerns (such as the brutal stakes of making the right marriage for women) and captures the scope of the work quite nicely. But it's too jokey, too light and fails to find the balance between humor and heartbreak.

And yet.... At the end of the show, I scanned the eight member cast and found myself thinking again and again, "Oh they were good." And "what a great showcase for him!" A good *Pride and Prejudice* is not so bad; it's just not as great as it should be.

Now it is a truth universally acknowledged that a review with a good fortune in ratings must be in want of a summary. So assuming you haven't read the novel (it came out 100 years ago! What are you waiting for?) well, here it is. Lizzy is the most sensible and appealing of the many Bennet daughters but certainly not the only one. Lydia (Kimberly Chatterjee) is a silly thing, Jane (Amelia Pedlow) is a pretty thing,. Mary (John Tufts) is a rather dour and fearsome thing while Kitty is nowhere to be found because really, who needs quite so many daughters? Not this play, which dispenses with Kitty (wisely) and recognizes that the Bennets are in hard times and unless the daughters marry well they might well become desperately dependent on the kindness of friends or truly destitute. Marriage is no joke.

Jane knows this but she can't help falling for the kindly and wealthy Charles Bingham (Mark Bedard) who indeed seems to like her back, very much. But Mrs. Bennet is rather obvious in her match-making, Bingham's friends fear fortune hunters (and look down on "country" folk like the Bennets) and Jane's hopes for marriage founder. Meanwhile, Lizzy refuses the tiresome proposal of tiresome Rev. Collins and suddenly the prospects for the Bennet daughters are dire indeed. Not helping things? A disreputable military man who whisks Lydia off her while Lizzy can't help butting heads with the glowering, handsome, infuriating and very rich Mr. Darcy at every turn. Good heavens!

So yes, the novel has a light tone but is penetrating and merciless about the fate of women, snobbery, true love and so much more. As written by Hamill and directed by Amanda Dehnert, only the comedy comes through consistently. Still, how well most of the cast delivers. Nance Williamson manages to make the usually overwrought Mrs. Bennet into a sympathetic and real character, without ignoring her comic and ungainly attempts to push her daughters forward. She's matched nicely by Chris Thorn as Mr. Bennet — when things turn serious, they rise to the occasion. Pedlow has less to do as Jane, but keeps a sometimes boring character appealing. Chatterjee is too broad as the silly Lydia, though she fares better in a turn as the imperious Lady Catherine. As he did in *Sense and Sensibility*, Jason O'Connell deeply impresses as Darcy.

Two others positively shone. John Tufts had great fun going back and forth as the frighteningly gloomy Mary and the bouncy, adorable Charles Bingley. He was awfully charming and if the script called for one too many jokes hammering home the idea of Bingley as a cute little puppy, Tufts never flagged in his enthusiasm. Similarly, the hemming and hawing of Rev Collins was drawn out once or twice too often, but that can't conceal the triumph of the evening — Mark Bedard essentially terrific as said Mr. Collins and the waspish Bingley sister AND the dashing but dissolute military man Mr. Wickham. It's the sort of turn that makes you believe he can and will do anything.

The weak link, unfortunately, was Hamill as Lizzy, one of the richest characters in literature. I loved Hamill in *Sense and Sensibility* while her turn in *Vanity Fair* was fine. (After all, Becky Sharp is not *supposed* to be likable.) She is an excellent writer/adaptor and can be an excellent actress. But the main fault of this adaptation is its relentless focus on the comic to the detriment of all else and Hamill's performance is the worst offender. Perhaps being the adaptor/star made the director accede to her vision? I know Hamill is capable of subtler

work (see S&S).

But here she underlines every joke, puts an exclamation mark on every statement and goes broad when being more real would be better and indeed funnier. She's not quite acting in a different play than the rest, but she comes close. Lizzy is such a joy, so funny and wise and so unforgiving of her own faults, so perceptive about others, so...alive that she should always be as complex and mercurial and believable as anyone else on stage. With a performance that clowns and shortchanges this greatest of characters, this *Pride and Prejudice* is hollow at its heart. It pains me to say it, since the evening she created has been so generous in creating great roles for her fellow actors. But this time, she has done no service to herself.

THE PARISIAN WOMAN * out of ****

HUDSON THEATRE

Who am I to question success? Beau Willimon broke out of the theater world in 2008 with *The Ides of March*, a political play loosely based on Howard Dean's Presidential run. (It was later turned into a film directed by and starring George Clooney.) Then Willimon hit the jackpot with his TV show *House Of Cards*, the story of a power-mad couple in DC climbing their way to the top. Based on a UK series of the same name, it's been a monster success since debuting in 2013. So now Willimon is making his Broadway debut...with a play about a power-mad couple in DC climbing their way to the top. Ok, the couple isn't that power mad and they want to do good (or at least *think* they want to do good) and instead of a UK TV show it's based on a French play by Henry Becque from 1885, so it's more *Dangerous Liaisons* than *House Of Cards*. Still, this subject matter seemed an odd choice to mark the latest stage of your career.

None of that would matter if *The Parisian Woman* was better, but it isn't. At first, the show looks like a Noel Coward comedy, right down to the audience giving entrance applause to everyone in the starry cast, forcing actors to pause and wait for the clapping to die down before delivering their first line. (I doubt they mind; it's that sort of play.) My guest felt the show would have played better at a faster clip emphasizing this light comedic aspect and indeed he's right. Instead, everything from the slow-moving sets to the doom-laden score to the performances all treat this trifling story as more Greek tragedy than the Greek holiday Coward might have preferred (and made more poignant).

Most of the pleasure derives from an early “twist” in the first few minutes, a later twist that’s robbed of its power because of how the play presents it and the performance of Blair Brown, who any sane theater goer would happily spend days and nights watching in anything. (Where oh where is her classic TV show? Someone please rescue it from whatever legal hell it’s in.) Both are impossible to avoid when discussing the plot so if you’re seeing the show, stop reading now.

In any case, the first (good) twist is watching Uma Thurman sparring with her older lover (Marton Csokas). He is jealous and clingy and demanding and suspicious of all her younger male friends who he knows full well would like to be more than friends. Just as he’s demanding one more time to see her phone so he can read her text messages, she tells him to be quiet. Her husband is home. Ha! Of course we thought he was her husband, but no, that’s the young and handsome tax attorney (Josh Lucas) who is a confidant to many in power on both sides of the aisle.

Slowly the story comes into view: our heroine’s husband is on the short list for a judgeship which he really, really wants. We’re in the age of Trump (this play has been punched up to be as current as possible) so there are references to Kelly (the White House Chief Of Staff) and that man (Trump) and so on. Weirdly, Thurman’s character is adamantly (if diffidently) liberal while she believes her husband to be a right winger. Somehow she has never quite realized his political beliefs, even though they live in DC and roam the corridors of power. She’s a budding acquaintance of the proposed new Chairwoman of the Federal Reserve (Blair Brown), he’s cozying up to one and all but his politics are a mystery to her. When she realizes her husband wants to be a judge so he can be free to do good — to leave a positive, liberal mark — why, she springs into action.

Needless to say, the muddled confusion about what the person you’re sharing your life with actually believes is a bit hard to swallow. But nothing makes sense in this muddled adaptation. (I couldn’t find an English translation of the original to compare the two.) Thurman’s character makes a brazen power move that is also a terrible betrayal of both a new friend and (perhaps) a lover for whom she has feelings. But Willimon reveals the betrayal and THEN shares some info about this romance. It kind of denudes the power of a betrayal when you actually don’t know the heroine has a relationship with the person she’s betraying or even how much it means to her. (She has many lovers.) Complicating the one interesting twist in the play, when we finally see the two lovers together, the betrayed person is clueless but clearly wants the relationship to continue. Not enough to break off their public relationship — they simply want Thurman to dump her husband and move across the

country to be conveniently nearby for trysts. True, Thurman and her husband have an open relationship and she has many loves — still, this proposal hardly makes the heart beat faster.

Worse is the slow pace set by director Pam MacKinnon and the production she's overseen. While the actual sets by Derek McLane are fine I suppose (nude sketches on the wall to indicate the licentious nature of this couple!), they take forever to lug into place, making each scene change feel ponderous. That leaves more unwelcome time for a scrim to come down, ticker tape of "breaking news" to flash on screen and characters to appear at entrances and pose and then disappear for no good reason, all while a score by Broken Chord plays which awkwardly combines a bland sort of drumbeat and synths (?) with some mournful strings to lugubrious effect.

Truly none of the characters make sense to themselves or each other. So who can care? Further complicating matters is that the fine film star Thurman is deeply uncomfortable in her stage debut. Lucas is not a newbie and fares better, but given the flat and unintelligible people they're playing, not by much. Philippa Soo has a forgettable role, while Csokas does better with a role that at least remains consistent. Only Blair Brown is a treat to watch from start to finish, which just goes to show how much a great actor can elevate the weakest of material.

ONCE ON THIS ISLAND ** out of ****

CIRCLE IN THE SQUARE

Tourists will flock to this *Island*! That's the billboard take-away after seeing this show with a paying crowd that had a lot of fun at the intimate Circle In the Square. (If only more Broadway houses could promise a great sightline in every seat of the house.) This revival of the Lynn Ahrens & Stephen Flaherty musical has proven an unexpected hit from day one, including sold out shows and audiences almost determined to enjoy themselves. Somehow, I'm happy for the enthusiastic cast and the show while wishing the actual production were better.

The story is a fairy tale, but not the Disney variety. It has desire and pain and sadness and an ending that is bittersweet, however joyously it is performed. In it, we meet the people of an island — half are dark-skinned and happy while the other half are well-off and light-skinned descendants of the intermingling of colonial French and locals. (It's a family show so I'll skip the realities of this history. Since the piece has various actors playing characters of both sorts, the prejudice of light-skinned blacks against those of a darker hue is mostly lost in favor of inequality.)

Our heroine is Ti Moune, a little girl whose parents die in a storm. She is adopted by an elderly couple who love her and raise her with affection. One day a rich boy named Daniel (the appealing Isaac Powell) crashes his car. The poor people are afraid to even approach the car (they might be blamed for his death) but Ti Moune saves him, nurses him back to health and literally fights off Death by promising her life in exchange for his. Daniel dallies with Ti Moune, enchanted by her earthy vitality and innocent joy in dance, not to mention her

belief they will be together. But no, Daniel ultimately rejects her in favor of the arranged marriage he is fated for and Death comes to collect the soul of Ti Moune that is its due. What a fool! (Though to be honest, his betrothed doesn't seem that bad.)

Ok, it doesn't *sound* happy but Ti Moune's sacrifice proves a symbol to future generations, paving the way for those who will pursue their true love regardless of skin color or class.

With two exceptions, the songs move the story along but don't really stick in the mind. One is "Mama Will Survive," your typical bring-down-the-house showcase that Alex Newell of *Glee* positively rips to shreds, getting another wave of laughter and applause just by fanning himself after this number is over. Unless they're fools, this is the number they'll perform on the Tony Awards, not some stupid medley. It's a song of encouragement for Ti Moune on her journey to the big city and while it's not really that good of a song, it's good enough. The other memorable song is "Some Girls," which Powell puts over nicely.

The truth is that both he and star Hailey Kilgore have been cast more for their dancing ability. This is a shame since Ti Moune is much better when a strong singer is cast in the lead, as Papermill Playhouse did when they cast Syesha Mercado of *American Idol*. Kilgore has a sweet presence but her singing is undistinguished and underlines the weak level of the material. A better singer can mask that but not her. The rest of the cast is filled with great talent like Tony winner Lea Salonga, but they have little to do, though Philip Boykin and Kenita R. Miller have a warm presence in multiple roles, especially as Ti Moune's adoptive parents.

Further complicating things are the production and costume design. Director Michael Arden understandably chose to emphasize the storytelling aspect of this fairy tale. But the unfortunate results are unappealing costumes for the gods and poor locals and a set that looks cobbled together, rather than imaginatively making something out of nothing. The idea was to echo the natural disasters devastating so much of the world right now. But the result is a goddess of death sporting scales shaped out of Coke cans (soda is bad for you?) and the lovely Salonga as the goddess of love sporting...*something* on her head as a sort of crown. It feels ramshackle and random more than anything else.

The result is ugly, when what I hoped for was a little magic. The island looked desolate and unappealing, not inviting. But neither was it the magic of the theater where a few props can generate entire worlds, like a blue cloth becoming water and so on. They might have gone for the bare-bones whimsy of *Peter and the Starcatcher* or they might have gone for a beautiful environment. Instead we got a real truck backing up into the room, live goats and chickens and a cast mostly decked out in unattractive, cobbled-together get-ups that weren't clever or charming.

One final weakness: there isn't enough choreography by Camille A. Brown. Towards the finale, we are told Daniel is really entranced by Ti Moune's dancing, which is kind of a surprise since we've barely seen her dance for him. But treating her like the hired help (Daniel's kind of a jerk), he pushes her to dance at a fancy ball and of course she breaks out into a funky, uninhibited dance that scandalizes the proper hosts and has the servants throwing caution to the wind and joining in. Happily, this exuberant scene is the show's best, combining Kilgore and Powell's best talents while pushing the story forward. Still, it would seem easy to have Daniel actually fall in love with Ti Moune or want to be with her or at least a little conflicted. But in both productions I've seen her desire for him is thoroughly one-sided and utterly undeserved. It's kind of a buzz kill, frankly, and this production doesn't solve that elemental defect in the story.

For a brief moment, *Once On This Island* sweeps you away with pure storytelling. The rest of the time, *Once On This Island* is too busy showing you how it is engaging in storytelling to let you focus on the actual story. I think perhaps the book and music is simply too weak to bear the weight of this second layering of invention and social commentary, though the impulse was understandable. Director Michael Arden delivered an absolute joy with his revival of *Spring Awakening*, which reimagined that ground-breaking show in a way that was profound, simple and revealing. He'll do better work, hopefully soon. *Once On This Island* is simply not as good a piece to rethink. But it's good enough for the audiences that seemed happy to just have fun and enjoy the talent on stage. Sometimes we tell the story just to have a story to tell, even if it's not the best story in the world.

Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

The Liar *** 1/2

Jitney *** 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) *** 1/2

Significant Other * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) ** (third visit, but *** if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) ** 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) *** 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) ****

The Light Years * 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) *** 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips **

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) *

Come From Away *

Miss Saigon **

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba * 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s **

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) ***

Latin History For Morons * 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

War Paint **

In and Of Itself ***

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) ***

The Antipodes **

Anastasia **

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory **

Oslo *** 1/2

The Little Foxes **

Groundhog Day ** 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O’Hara at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra **

A Doll’s House, Part 2 *** 1/2

Bandstand ** 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) ***

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) **

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) ** 1/2

Rooms **

Arlington ***

All The President's Men (Public Theater one-night event at Town Hall) ** 1/2

Happy Days (w Dianne Wiest) *** 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret *** 1/2

The Whirligig * 1/2

Sojourners and Her Portmanteau **

Broadway By The Year 1997-2006 ***

The Boy Who Danced On Air ** 1/2

The Government Inspector ** 1/2

A Doll's House, Part 2 (with Julie White and Stephen McKinley Henderson) ***

Desperate Measures ***

The Honeymooners **

People, Places & Things **

M. Butterfly * 1/2

Red Roses, Green Gold no stars

Of Thee I Sing (MasterVoices concert presentation at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

The Band's Visit (Broadway) *** 1/2

Junk **

Actually **

Harry Clarke ** 1/2

Bedlam's Peter Pan * 1/2

Home For The Holidays *

Describe The Night **

Pride and Prejudice ***

The Parisian Woman *

Once On This Island **

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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.