

Theater: Helen Mirren -- The Queen of Broadway

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THE AUDIENCE *** out of ****

GERALD SCHOENFELD THEATRE

Blurb-ready pronouncements are almost impossible to resist when it comes to the thoroughly entertaining new play *The Audience*: Helen Mirren is theater royalty; she gives a command(ing) performance; Mirren crowns her career with this new triumph. See? All of it true and all of it a little too easy -- that is, too glib in praising Mirren's subtle approach to the role of Queen Elizabeth II.

The same might be said for this slick new work by Peter Morgan, who crafted an Oscar-worthy role for Mirren in the feature film *The Queen* -- too glib. *The Audience* is polished to a fault, proceeding with clockwork efficiency from a little comedy to a little drama, from the personal to the political and back again. Not a moment of the play will actually surprise you. But the production of the play is faultless. This is boulevard entertainment of the most professional, satisfying sort. I wish smart, enjoyable work of this sort could be taken for granted but it's too rare for that.

The conceit is simple. Every week, the Queen meets with her prime minister in a private audience where -- we are told -- the PM shares information on the issues of the moment and what to expect in the days to come. The PM doesn't consult with the Queen, of course, not strictly speaking. Publicly she is expected to support the government, any government, no matter what they do. But naturally the Queen's actual, heartfelt support is valuable and simply meeting with someone week after week invariably means their questions, their concerns have to be addressed at some basic level. It's only human.

And humanizing is exactly what *The Audience* does for its enduring monarch. We see the Queen meeting with various prime ministers over the decades. Indeed, PMs come and go but the Queen remains. We begin in her middle years, skip back to the beginning, when the Queen was schooled in what to do during "the audience" by Winston Churchill, then forward again to nearly the present and back and forth again and again, from Maggie Thatcher to John Major, from boorish men who butt heads over policy to insecure men crumbling under the pressure.

It's amusing, quietly dramatic, a little informative (American audiences will surely leave the show patting themselves on the back for learning a little recent British history) and each act ends with an iconic, powerful tableaux. I'm quite certain Mirren will enjoy adding a well-deserved Tony to her Oscar and multiple Emmys.

What elevates this production is the impeccable work of all involved, led by director Stephen Daldry, who elicits just the right tone of light seriousness from his large cast. There are no weak links, though obviously several stand out thanks to juicier, lengthier scenes. Dakin Matthews does a nice, glowering Churchill, offering a sort of avuncular father figure to the young woman still finding her feet as the monarch of the realm. Judith Ivey has a blast as a furious Margaret Thatcher chiding the Queen for making her displeasure known over Thatcher's refusal to boycott apartheid-era South Africa. Richard McCabe has the most substantial role of the night as Harold Wilson, a working class fellow who seems like a bull in a china shop during their first meeting but develops a teasing, genuinely warm relationship with the Queen over many years.

Every part is handled well, from Dylan Baker's smooth work as John Major (smooth is redundant when discussing Major and this production as a whole) down to the scene-setting comments of Geoffrey Beevers as

the Equerry. (Though wouldn't this defender of tradition, this stickler for detail refer to the late royal by her proper title of "Diana, Princess of Wales" and not "Princess Diana"?)

In the show's riskiest gamble, the Queen chats with an adolescent version of herself throughout the show, offering advice and telling her younger self she'll just have to get used to everyone calling her "ma'am" and doing things she doesn't want to do. As a dramatic gambit, it sounds awful. Happily, Morgan doesn't weigh down those scenes with any heavy pop psychology beyond "get on with it." Better still, the younger Elizabeth was delightfully embodied by Sadie Sink at the performance I caught.

All the technical elements are beautifully judged, from Bob Crowley's quietly impressive sets working in tandem with the lighting of Rick Fisher to the invisible sound design of Paul Arditti. But special note must be made of Crowley's costumes combining with the hair and makeup design of Ivana Primorac in the look of Mirren as Queen Elizabeth II.

I've no idea if it was in Morgan's original conception of the play or developed somewhere along the way, but one crucial decision works perfectly. That was the choice to have most of Mirren's transformations from one era to another -- from middle-aged to elderly to young and back again -- take place mostly on stage in front of our eyes. When a time change occurs, a flock of servants flutter about Mirren, essentially hiding her from view as costumes and wigs are replaced. Then they fly away and the "new" Queen is revealed. An absolute ripple of pleasure flowed through the crowd the first time this happened as a middle-aged Queen disappeared and Mirren was revealed as a young, 25 year old Queen nervously wondering how to behave with Churchill.

But these varied transformations are never stunts that call attention to themselves. Having them take place onstage almost in front of us is a canny way of downplaying the "trick" of seeing Mirren jump back and forth through time. It's just a new wig and a new frock, nothing remarkable, is what this straightforward presentation says to us. Don't make a fuss. That lets the audience concentrate on "the audience," not on the mechanics of how she is transformed.

None of it would matter without Mirren. I suppose the play might prove a good showcase for some other actress some day. But it's hard to imagine anyone doing it better. Of course the unflappable, publicly imperturbable Queen Elizabeth II is not a role for grand-standing. (Her predecessor in lengthy reigns Queen Victoria? Her namesake Queen Elizabeth I? Grandstand away!) It's a part designed for subtlety and wry looks. But Mirren is marvelous, letting the few moments of emotional depth pass by without making too much of them. The comedy is milked marvelously. The subtle thread of seeing how the Queen learns on the job, growing from a neophyte to someone who proves an able sounding board and voice of concern without ever overstepping her bounds is well judged. The regal manner in which she wields her power such as it is proves fascinating.

Watching a stage crowded with Prime Ministers bow to her at the finale is both sweet and moving and appropriate. Mirren gives us the Queen, again, and it's a triumph.

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