

# Theater: "Hir" Here; Troubled "Thérèse"

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**HIR** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**THÉRÈSE RAQUIN** \* out of \*\*\*\*

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### PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZON

A polemic instead of a play, Hir is blessed with talented and committed actors who mine the text of playwright Taylor Mac for the humorous and complicated and real emotions that are buried underneath speeches and spectacle like I.E.D.s of life, little explosions of genuine drama illuminating what is all too often just a disconnected series of ideas.

The story teeters between a Christopher Durang-like nuttiness and earnest dissection of our ills. But the plot is clear if cruel. Isaac (Cameron Scoggins) has come home from the wars. It doesn't matter which war -- there's always a war -- but we're in the present and the war was Iraq-istan. But his home is a white trash train wreck with unfolded laundry everywhere just the first hint of disarray. Isaac's father Arnold (Daniel Oreskes) is wearing a dress, sporting clown makeup and so over-medicated it's hard to know what is drug-induced and what is merely the after effects of a stroke.

His mother Paige (Kristine Nielsen) treats his father with cruel efficiency, keeping the man in diapers, spraying him with a water bottle if he acts up and getting him to sleep in a cardboard box. And she's yanked Isaac's younger sibling out of society for some haphazard home schooling -- no gender please, since said sibling Max (Tom Phelan) is transitioning and prefers the term "hir" (pronounced HERE) to "him" or "her."

Like so many veterans, Isaac will find it difficult to transition to civilian life. Unlike many vets, his transition involves a domestic revolt, a counter-revolution, house-cleaning as rebellion and loads of estrogen and "mones" (hormones to the unhip) for seemingly everyone. If Isaac doesn't suffer PTSD from the last war, he may well do so after this one.

I chose to frame the play from the perspective of Isaac, perhaps because I found Scoggins a pleasant surprise (building on his fine work in Pocatello, Scoggins is clearly a talent). I already knew Oreskes as a good actor and Nielsen is always a pleasure of the highest order. But why didn't I tell the story from the perspective of transitioning teen Max, since Phelan like the rest of the cast is good? Am I taking my cue from the play, in which events kick into gear with Isaac's return? Or am I just reverting to a comfortably cis-gender viewpoint in a clear reflection of my patriarchal bias? Let the debates begin, a debate Mac would surely encourage and enjoy.

I just wish the debates didn't overshadow the play or more exactly I wish there was more of a play for the debates to interrupt. Much here is intended to provoke but very little is grounded in character or consistent from scene to scene. One hates to bring up reality but it does intrude. The father Andy was physically abusive -- Isaac in fact says one reason he joined the military was so he could learn how to stop his dad. (Spoiler alert: violence doesn't solve anything!) Yet does that justify Paige's cruel treatment in return, much less her frittering away both the modest family resources and her child's education? Of course not. But when Isaac tries to end this cycle of abuse (and Max jumps in eagerly to take orders) it's all painted as some patriarchal betrayal, a feeling reinforced by the inevitable resort to violence we all anticipate for too long.

Isaac doesn't want to see his dad treated like an abused dog? Ok, but why does he egg on his dad's rebellion and delight in seeing the old man return to his abusive ways in one symbolic act? Because the play insists he must, even though it flies in the face of what he know about Isaac. Why is Paige the aggrieved one at the end rather than equally damaged and unhinged? Because the play insists so. Nielsen is a marvel at many points, giving a loopy energy to various showdowns. But she can't do anything with several speeches, especially a final one about why we send young men off to war that has literally nothing to do with anything that came before.

It's all exhausting, right down to a complicated set of pulleys distracting one throughout the show just so the family can stage a brief shadow puppet play depicting the cruel abuse Paige suffered at the hands of her husband, abuse both boys know so well. He beat her. He raped her. And when Isaac crosses a line, he too must be defeated by Paige to protect the brave new future she envisions, one in which apparently one form of tyranny will be replaced by another.

Max is lost in the shuffle, even as we sense how Max's future is being swallowed up by Paige's damaged need to be obeyed, whatever the price. It's almost wrong to try and sort out the conflicting nonsense of a play that has more fun and rings more true when gently tweaking the varied new terms of gender and an insistence on their need, even while honoring Max's journey.

The characters can't be pinned down since they rarely make sense. Paige is flighty but smart. Isaac is exhausted, understanding and always throwing up from the nightmare of war...and yet is soon a regular martinet, barking out orders at Max and going toe to toe with a mother he seemed to have every sympathy for, despite horror over the life they were living in his absence. Perhaps only Arnold is consistent, a monster tied up in chains that bites the moment it gets a chance.

Niegel Smith directs it all with empathy, eliciting performances from a cast that moment to moment can deliver. The costumes by Gabriel Berry and scenic design by David Zinn are appropriately out there, though the audience applause for the tidying up that took place during the intermission seemed a tad bizarre. And it gives nothing away to say that there are holes in the walls of this starter home. At the finale, they are "revealed" by Paige, further reminder of the terrible violence she and her children suffered at the hands of her husband. But we've been told about this dreadful violence from the first moments of the show. We've seen it discussed and debated and even dramatized in that shadow play. So what possible impact could there be in "revealing" these holes? Given her state of mind, her desire for chaos and Paige's determination to insist attention must be paid to what they were exposed to, all we think is, "Why would she cover them up in the first place?" Like so much else, it doesn't make any sense. I am not very satisfied with this disjointed, rambling review but unfortunately it reflects the play I saw.

**THÉRÈSE RAQUIN** \* out of \*\*\*\*

**ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY STUDIO 54**

No review could be more damning than the coughing and kvetching of the audience at the Roundabout from the first minute of this revival to the last. They muttered, fought with one another, checked their phones, headed to the bathrooms before the break, wandered around, chatted, muttered, coughed and coughed and coughed again in apparently a restless desire to do pretty much anything but pay attention to the play. When the cast paused to make the seasonal request for donations to the worthy [Broadway Cares/Equity Fights AIDS](#), star Keira Knightley said, "Thank you for being such a wonderful audience." I wanted to applaud: it was the best acting of the night.

But don't blame the audience (though there's no excuse for using your phone right up to the moment the play begins.) From what I can gather, the Emile Zola potboiler Thérèse Raquin has been staged countless times, filmed, musicalized (once by Harry Connick Jr.), turned into an opera and a TV miniseries and as far as I can tell, never terribly successfully. Or should I say enduringly. Like the novel, some early stage or film adaptations

might have been commercial hits but they don't seem to have entered the canon as classics.

The story was bold for its time: a woman cheats on her hateful husband with his rakish friend. Determined to be together, they off the inconvenient spouse but instead of happiness find themselves haunted by the memory of their crime. Zola wrote better, more important novels but the plot of this one has echoed down through the ages in many variations. The Postman Always Rings Twice comes to mind, as do many others. But this particular telling seems to have little to offer but that initial, sizzling idea. We know what's going to happen, we anticipate one or two awful ways the scheme might end (none of them happy) and one of those comes to pass and then it's over.

Knightley has command of the stage, but strikes just one note: a clenched, tightly wound misery. Instead of a hissable husband and hateful mother-in-law, they are both reduced here. The talented Judith Light gives us a rounded, actually rather nice mother-in-law. She might be clueless and is certainly blind to the hatefulness of her son, but this is not a petty or mean woman.

Similarly, Gabriel Ebert as the husband seems toothless. I've never read the novel or seen any other version of this story. So when he and Thérèse are first together, I actually thought they were siblings or even perhaps she was a servant. That's surely intentional. But the extent of his character development is pushing her when no one is around, like a naughty schoolboy. She soon thumps him back and is so decisive it's hard to imagine she would ever be cowed by him. And yet this weak-willed, silly fool is supposed to literally haunt our murderous protagonists? A weightier presence might be believable as a malevolent spirit that could not be shaken. But Ebert's husband wouldn't trouble the sleep of a mouse.

When things go wrong in a production (or a crime, for that matter), they often go terribly wrong, as if one bad turn on a journey means you can never reach your destination. Director Evan Cabnet sticks with a plodding, inevitable approach from start to end. It's played as Greek tragedy when perhaps treating it like a juicy melodrama might add a little spice to the dour proceedings.

And everything seems to be taken literally. When Thérèse is haunted by the sound of her late husband's voice from beyond the grave...we hear her late husband's voice from beyond the grave. When the handsome devil Laurent (Matt Ryan) says being in his tiny attic apartment with a skylight makes him feel like he's among the stars, we later see a scene at said apartment where it is literally suspended alone among the stars. When husband and wife and best friend go boating, by god there's an actual rowboat and an expansive, boringly literal lake of water for them to splash in.

The set design by Beowulf Boritt features a confusing back wall that is maybe the sky or a concrete world closing in or something. The main set of a home flies up into the rafters and comes back down again so often it acts like a yo-yo, most notably for the scene of a funeral where it barely gets out of sight before seeming to plop back down again. Understandably, it seemed restless and dissatisfied, as if the set wanted to be anywhere else but onstage. One could understand -- and at least it didn't cough.

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Da no rating

[A Month In The Country](#) \*\* 1/2

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