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Theater: Ibsen on Broadway, 'Detroit' Falls Apart, Sondheim and a Red-Handed Otter

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AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE ** 1/2 out of ****
DETROIT ** 1/2
RED-HANDED OTTER ** 1/2
MARRY ME A LITTLE **

AN ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE ** 1/2
MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB

Any fears you might have that an Ibsen play will be slow and dutiful are quickly banished by director Dough Hughes and this new "version" (not translation, but something more, apparently) by Rebecca Lenkiewicz. It

is quick and broad and rambunctious to a fault.

Two brothers face off in this drama. Richard Thomas is Peter, the mayor of a spa town who is dutiful and proper; we know we shouldn't like him because he worries about people having a drink or eating too late or children being too loud. He's a bore. Boyd Gaines is Thomas, the far more appealing and less responsible one. He tosses his shoes off and throws a rumpled coat onto a chair without a care in the world. He's even naive enough to think he has some good news: the spa that the town depends on for its livelihood is poisoned by the proximity of its pipes to a tannery. People are literally getting sick from the spa. But not to fear! A complete overhaul at huge expense and over a period of years will clear the problem up. Even for a Norwegian in a small town in 1882, that seems rather a blinkered attitude.

Needless to say, Thomas's scientific findings (backed up a university analysis of water drawn from the spa) spark a power struggle between the two brothers and all the major players in the town, from the businessmen to the newspaper editor and trade unions. What rarely gets mentioned in this show of ideas -- even by Thomas, oddly enough -- are the people who will actually get sick and perhaps die if nothing is done and the problem hushed up.

Act One has a shouting match between the two brothers (both actors are fine but a little more contrast here would have been helpful, perhaps if Richard Thomas had been slyer and calmer, aggravating his

brother more). Then come the other players: Hovstad the newspaper editor (John Procaccino), an amateur firebrand (James Waterston) and Aslaksen the unofficial spokesperson for the workers (Gerry Bamman).

They all seem "types" but Act Two has the chance to deepen them. Thomas is distraught when his brother Peter refuses to act and wants to silence the report condemning the spa. So he urges the newspaper editor to print it up. When he walks away, suddenly we see the far more cynical play that Ibsen wrote. The newspaper editor is merely using Thomas to gain an edge and upset the status quo, hoping to drive out the current political figures and replace them with people of his own ilk. Aslaksen turns out to be more than the dullard who always preaches restraint and moderation; he too is playing a game of power politics. Lurking in the background is Thomas's father-in-law, a businessman nursing his own grudge against the establishment.

Unfortunately, these come across as plot twists rather than a fuller understanding of the characters. We should have had more of a sense of the complexity of the players involved starting in act one. And Thomas soon becomes his own tiresome worst enemy, preaching on and on about the tyranny of the majority and the moral rot of the town, rather than the case at hand. It's hard not to bring a modern sensibility to this play but we wouldn't think about second opinions and public opinion in quite the dismissive way we do if the play itself engaged us more.

The acting throughout is fine and hews to the broad brushstrokes and straightforward tenor of this production. The set by John Lee Beatty is solid and makes good use of the theater itself for a scene set in a meeting hall. But the finale where Thomas's life is crashing down takes place in his narrow study right near the edge of the stage, keeping the sense of despair rather small scale. And the music by David Van Tieghem is too insistent, giving the show a pompous, important air it surely does not need.

We're left uncertain about so much: why does Thomas's wife (Kathleen McNenny) ultimately stand by him after he's shot himself in the foot at that public meeting? Wifely devotion? Was she won over by his tirade? And what drives the naval man, Captain Horster (Randall Newsome), who risks and loses all in his support of Thomas? Is he the lone man of the town with principles and no ulterior motive? I have no idea, not from this production.

A cynical play about politics using a potential crisis for personal gain would be welcome anytime, especially in an election year. But this version proves its own worst enemy, avoiding the complexity of the real issues at hand (science vs faith, family dynamics, cynicism versus idealism, politics as blood sport) in favor of crowd-pleasing self-importance.

DETROIT ** 1/2
PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS

This Pulitzer Prize-finalist has a lot on its mind. Playwright Lisa D'Amour tackles suburban life, the sense of uprootedness that seems a constant in America thanks to the constant push for change, the changing roles of men and women and much more. It is best early in when rooted in believable characters and goes off towards the end when the play indulges in big reveals and a flat finale that adds little to what came before. But the strong cast and intelligence and work make it worthwhile.

Mary (Amy Ryan) and Ben (David Schwimmer) do the neighborly thing: they invite the couple that moved in next door in their suburban neighborhood over for a BBQ on the patio. Sharon (Sarah Sokolovic) and Kenny (Darren Pettie) are friendly, nice and just a little...off. In a few minutes, Sharon is crying, literally crying and they've managed to reveal all sorts of personal details about their stints in rehab (where they met), personal quirks and much more.

It's clear that Sharon and Denny are self-destructive (their home has no furniture in it, so their story such as it is proves even more suspect). But are Mary and Ben any better? Ben claims to be working all day on some internet start-up to offer financial planning since he was fired from his bank in the Great Recession. All we see him do, however, is futz around. Their marriage seems just as shaky as the one with

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An Evil Dead Remake? Why?

addicts who both reach for a beer when the other one isn't around. All their lives are falling apart, it seems, just like the homes they live in. (The patio door to one house keeps sticking; the half-built deck at the other is rotting on the inside.)

All of this is good when kept on a low-key level. Schwimmer has a nice sad-sack stage presence that lets him be overshadowed by Ryan without conceding the fight left in Ben. Pettie has a convincing edge of danger to him and Sokolovic proves off-kilter enough to make Sharon work.

D'Amour begins with a very solid structure, going from backyard to front yard, from one house to another. The escalating injuries, from minor to bone-breaking, are an excellent physical realization of the turmoil within. Director Anne Kaufman keeps things moving briskly and the set design by Louisa Thompson using dressing to successfully double the exteriors, with only Sharon and Kenny's backyard a stretch when it comes to letting us forget it's essentially the same set as that for Mary and Ben's patio too. The sound design by Matt Tierney is a notable, if appropriately subtle, standout, swiftly and invisibly setting the mood for day and night and the particular ambience of people in a backyard hearing sounds from inside. The zapping of bugs is an early foreshadowing Tierney avoids overdoing and the one big joke of a jogger going by works very well.

So the problems that tamp down the excitement of the beginning rest squarely with D'Amour. Late in the game, Sharon and Kenny morph from merely self-destructive (the sort of people who want to drag others down with them) into agents of evil purposefully mucking up the otherwise nice couple of Mary and Ben when they saw the chance. Lies and the revelations of more backstory prove quite uninteresting in a flat denouement handled by the marvelous John Cullum, who has to lay far too much pipe in a final scene but still provides an avuncular anchor and one good joke. It's all typified by a party late in the play that gets out of hand, a bold scene in which all four main actors dance around and around, becoming wilder and wilder. It's a credit to the actors that the scene doesn't fall horribly flat, given its extended length and the numerous hard to swallow moments in it.

On a far less important scale, the choice to represent a fire with glimpses of an actual flaming inferno towards the back of the stage was also misjudged. Lighting and sound and the performances of the actors had already brought the fire to life in our minds. Going to elaborate lengths to create an actual fire was gilding the lily. In the same way, *Detroit* (a distracting title) loses our confidence when it makes literal the themes of destruction and anomie at its heart.

RED-HANDED OTTER ** 1/2 PLAYWRIGHTS REALM AT CHERRY LANE THEATRE

Detroit suffers by going from a realistic play to something more odd and unexpected. The promising playwright Ethan Lipton however does better when *Red-Handed Otter* is truer to its oddball heart. Only when the play becomes more conventional and obvious towards the end does it falter a little.

As with *Detroit*, a strong cast makes the show worthwhile and gives Lipton a good showcase for his burgeoning talent. Its set mainly in the security room of an anonymous office building, a room filled with monitors showing hallways and lobbies and offices where absolutely nothing is ever going on. Paul (the excellent Matthew Maher) is the hero of sorts, a sad sack nightwatchman who has lost his girlfriend and now his cat. He loved his cat, to put it mildly, and the play loves pets as well. I am inured to the charms of all animals (I believe man invented doors to keep animals out, not to keep them in) so believe me when I say the obsessive and endearing and just plain weird focus on pets in this play is wonderfully captivating, whether Paul is extolling his cat as one of the five best all-time cats in history or another character, Don (the charming Bobby Moreno) tells the tale of his red-handed otter.

This is where the play shines, allowing a seemingly minor topic to reveal character, create drama and especially humor. The highlight of the show for me was when one character reveals she has never had a pet and the others turn on her in shock and distrust. I was relieved they didn't question the audience as well.

Pets are not necessarily a substitute for human interaction but they do represent here the need and the potential for love. Paul and Don both fancy Angela (Rebecca Henderson, quite good) and have their ins and outs with the other guards when clocking in or having a party or wake, depending on your point of view. But their friendship is the heart of the show and they make a nice shaggy couple. When the pet-centric talk dies down and the play reveals what we knew all along about the desire for a meaningful person in your life, Red-handed Otter becomes less interesting. The cast led by the able direction of Mike Donahue gives it their all, leaving you to believe that Lipton has a voice worth exploring.

MARRY ME A LITTLE ** KEEN COMPANY ON THEATRE ROW

The premise of *Marry Me A Little* is paper-thin, a very modest frame on which to hang some "minor" Stephen Sondheim tunes, both trunk songs and ones that appeared in other shows. (Is there a minor Sondheim? Not really, of course.)

The conceit by Craig Lucas & Norman Rene amounts to nothing more than two New Yorkers living one floor away in an apartment building, both young and beautiful and lonely. They share the same space on stage but we soon realize the man (a handsome Jason Tam) lives below the woman (Lauren Molina). When she starts playing her cello, he pounds on the ceiling with a broom and so on. If you can't figure out where this is headed, bless you; you've got a lot of surprises in store for you in the world of theater

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and TV sitcoms.

Should this poor excuse for a show matter as long as you're singing songs by Sondheim? Turns out it does. Director Jonathan Silverstein can move the actors around and establish the "rules" of the show easily. But he can't give shape or form to a string of songs where one does not follow the other with any logic. The songs don't quite chart an imaginary romance that each person is hoping for. Emotionally, one number just follows the next, a happy song after a sad one, and with no emotional arc, no character to anchor them they just become frustrating. Are they reflecting the inner mood of each character? Is it one pretend love affair between two people who may never meet? None of it quite gels so we never know. But we keep working to make sense of the order and choice of songs and that proves exhausting and counter-productive. These two same actors might have performed these songs in a cabaret setting and had a much better night since we wouldn't have been looking for some continuity, some story that never existed.

Molina's voice is a theatrical one leaning towards the Audra McDonald school. It would be better suited to a larger stage perhaps than this intimate venue. Tam comes better off here. They both have their moments but those are hard to pin down since the show itself is hard to pin down and ultimately self-defeating. When it ends in the most obvious possible manner, well, by that point we accept it with resignation. Little that occurred earlier led us to expect anything more.

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare In The Park w Lily Rabe) ****
Chimichangas And Zoloft *
Closer Than Ever ***
Cock ** 1/2
Harvey with Jim Parsons *
My Children! My Africa! ***
Once On This Island ***
Potted Potter *
Storefront Church ** 1/2
Title And Deed ***
Picture Incomplete (NYMF) **
Flambe Dreams (NYMF) **
Rio (NYMF) **
The Two Month Rule (NYMF) *
Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2
Stealing Time (NYMF) **
Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2
Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ***
Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2
How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2
Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***
Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2
Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2
Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2
Living With Henry (NYMF) *
A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2
The Last Smoker In America **
Gore Vidal's The Best Man (w new cast) ***
Into The Woods at Delacorte ** 1/2
Bring It On: The Musical **
Bullet For Adolf *
Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc. **
Harrison, TX ***
Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck" (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Pink Milk (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Who Murdered Love (FringeNYC) no stars
Storytime With Mr. Buttermen (FringeNYC) **
#MormonInChief (FringeNYC) **
An Interrogation Primer (FringeNYC) ***
An Evening With Kirk Douglas (FringeNYC) *
Sheherizade (FringeNYC) **
The Great Pie Robbery (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Independents (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
The Dick and The Rose (FringeNYC) **
Magdalen (FringeNYC) ***
Bombsheltered (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Paper Plane (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Rated M For Murder (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Mallory/Valerie (FringeNYC) *
Non-Equity: The Musical! (FringeNYC) *
Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
City Of Shadows (FringeNYC) ***

Forbidden Broadway: Alive & Kicking ***
 Salamander Starts Over (FringeNYC) ***
 Pieces (FringeNYC) *
 The Train Driver ***
 Chaplin The Musical * 1/2
 Detroit ** 1/2
 Heartless at Signature **
 Einstein On The Beach at BAM ****
 Red-Handed Otter ** 1/2
 Marry Me A Little **
 An Enemy Of The People ** 1/2

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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3fingerbrown
673 Fans

07:52 AM on 10/04/2012

I've seen Marry Me a Little in a previous production, and I had the same feeling. Why not just present these minor-but-wonderful songs as a revue with the theme of young love and forget trying to concoct a story around them? Has anyone ever paid their way into Marry Me a Little because they wanted to see the story? What they paid for is those early Sondheim songs -- just give them what they came for.

I can't believe John Cullum is still working. He was a name actor on Broadway when I was a little boy. That was about eight presidents ago.

[Permalink](#) | [Share it](#)**HUFFPOST BLOGGER****Michael Giltz**
freelance writer
132 Fans

04:55 PM on 10/04/2012

Thanks for commenting. Like many I first saw John Cullum in Northern Exposure. He was terrific two seasons ago in The Scottsboro Boys. He's not bad here, but the part is pointless so he can't do anything with it. What did you see him in? On A Clear Day? Shenandoah?

[Permalink](#) | [Share it](#)**3fingerbrown**
673 Fans

06:34 AM on 10/05/2012

Cullum was in the first B'way show I ever saw: 1776. I recall him scaring the bejesus out of me with his "Molasses to Rum" number. Then, yes, there was Shenandoah when I was a young high-schooler, then a Cy Coleman--Comden & Green show, On the Twentieth Century, one of the best non-Sondheim shows of that era -- a near perfect night's entertainment. Years later, he was very good in Urinetown. Cullum has fared less well in dramas -- I've seen him in a few flops.

Cullum is one of the NY actors I've seen so many times, he's like a yard marker of my life. Phillip Bosco and Marian Seldes also. Gaining on them all is Boyd Gaines, who seems to be everywhere these days. I first saw him in She Loves Me and several times since. He is today what Cullum was in the '70s and '80s.

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