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THE GLASS MENAGERIE *** 1/2 out of ****

THE LIGHT YEARS * 1/2 out of ****

SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE **** out of ****

IDOMENEO AT THE MET *** 1/2 out of ****

THE GLASS MENAGERIE *** 1/2 out of ****

BELASCO THEATRE

When they announced Sally Field was coming to Broadway with *The Glass Menagerie* just two and a half years after Cherry Jones triumphed in the role, like most people I thought, "So soon?" And, "Joe Mantello? Isn't he too old to play Tom?" It's a treat to report how wrong I was. The casting of Mantello is a masterstroke and this production is the best I've ever seen. OK, I've only seen it on stage with Jones in 2013 and before that with Julie Harris in 1994. Still, this stripped-down presentation has an emotional truthfulness and clarity that turns the play from a showcase for one actress into a work of drama unburdened by Southern floridness. Like glass held up to the light, it's shot through with intelligence and nuance and is all the more powerful for it. I'll be comparing all future productions I see to the memory of this one.

That's appropriate since this is of course a memory play by Tennessee Williams. Tom the narrator is a stand-in for the playwright but usually it's played by a young man who fits in as the son and brother of the story. I probably thought the then-35 year old Zachary Quinto was too old to play Tom back in 2013. To be more exact, he felt too old to play the son and too young to play the adult Tom looking back. (Mind you, Quinto was almost exactly the same age as Tennessee Williams when this play was first produced, but stick with me here.)

Joe Mantello, in contrast, is 54 years old. His every moment on stage underlines the idea of a man looking back with pain and regret and love at the crucial moment in his life. Mantello's mature looks and wry manner add poignancy throughout, by seeming more an equal to his mother than a child and a comforting, fatherly presence to his sister. It works wonders even in the brief moment when he's palling around with a co-worker. Normally, two young guys horsing around plays without affect. But seeing Mantello goof with the much younger Finn Wittrock (32, but easily passing for his 20s) strikes home again and again that this is a bittersweet and mostly bitter reflection on what's already been lost.

Director Sam Gold presents this tale of regret in a genuine black box, the stage bare of all but the most basic props, like a dining room table, a Victrola and a neon sign for the dance hall across the street. Some props sit on shelves off to the side and that's about it. The cast enters at audience level, standing quietly while Tom bounds onstage to set the scene, introducing the various characters including his mother Amanda, his sister Laura and Jim the coworker who will be the Gentleman Caller, that fabled repository of hopes and dreams.

And then we discover another bold choice. While the show fights against realism (there is no set, really, and Mantello is decades older than the character he plays) it also embraces it with the casting of Madison Ferris for she has muscular dystrophy. It's an arduous process for her to get out of a wheelchair and maneuver up the metal stairs leading from the orchestra seating to the stage and back into the chair. Every time Ferris goes from chair to floor and back again during the show, we see the daily struggles she faces to accomplish the simplest of tasks. How to tackle the limp or handicap of Laura has brought forth a rainbow of options (is it exaggerated? downplayed?) but here we have stark reality to say, whatever the truth for the character here is the truth you will see today.

This gives Laura a weight she sometimes lacks, especially since Ferris imbues the part with a resigned and quiet strength, resolutely dealing with what she must, however much or little fuss is paid by those around her.

And that's one more reason *The Glass Menagerie* doesn't feel like a supporting cast circling a star turn. Taking her cue from everything around her, Field is superb as a realistic if desperate Amanda. If she worries that her son Tom will abandon them just like her husband, well by gosh she's right, isn't she? And without Amanda as a caricature, her hectoring and pleading and fanciful talk of yesteryear don't play as the impetus for driving Tom away. It's merely the strained manner of a woman who knows she's already lost him. Never in reading or seeing the play have I felt it so completely the story of all three family members as I did here.

And there's always the arrival of the Gentleman Caller to wait for. He's a friend of Tom from work and unbeknownst to them the boy Laura had a crush on in high school. Jim is Amanda's last hope. Tom is halfway out the door but she begs him to make sure Laura is taken care of first. While Tom isn't strictly matchmaking, it's clear Jim will be the best shot at a happy ending for all of them. And the quiet conversation between Jim and Laura is so sweet and charming you can't help falling under its spell. No matter that you know how it turns out (or at least can guess how it turns out), you want to believe he might just be falling in love with Laura, just a little. And who knows?

It's always magical and remains so here, but not because we are gently deluded against our better judgment into thinking romance might blossom. A pitch-perfect Wittrock takes his cue from the fact that Jim is big into self-improvement and taking a night class in public speaking. He delivers every line with booming sincerity and is incapable of guile. Jim is kind and thoughtful and sweet but we don't think for a moment that Jim might be a white knight. He's just a nice if slightly dim guy, a decent fellow who treats Tom decently and treats Laura decently and then leaves, as we know he must. It's magical not for the possibility of love but perhaps for showing them a glimpse of a world not overwhelmed by shame and regret and angst, a world this family will never live in. In another counterintuitive move, their "date" is lit solely by the natural light of candles, the very symbol of a romantic moment. Their scene together is always kind and the candlelight both softens the blow and yet serves as a constant reminder of the genuine romance that simply isn't in the cards.

This isn't a precious *Menagerie* or an extreme one. It doesn't scale the mountaintops because it shouldn't. Amanda is not Lear. Here in this excellent revival she's a real woman with a real son and a real daughter and real fears that come true — again — as they have before and will in the future, whatever cramped and narrow future is left to her. It's a future stripped of magic and pretense, much as the stage is stripped of everything but the essentials. That's cold comfort to Amanda but bracingly powerful to us.

THE LIGHT YEARS * 1/2 out of ****

PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS

Two World Fairs held in Chicago during the 1890s and the 1930s are the framework for this new play. Written by Hannah Bos and Paul Thureen, it's also credited as "developed and directed" by Oliver Butler and "made by" the theater company the Debate Society. Unfortunately, it has a Frankenstein's monster feel to it, a stitched together creation with each part somehow shakily competent but not quite satisfying and the whole never really coming to life.

The old school, jokey opener begins with a hammy actor/impresario (Rocco Sisto) slipping out from behind the curtains to apologize in advance for the rickety production we're about to see, complete with "accidents" happening off stage to his evident distress (and our modest laughter). Soon the shape of this time-traveling evening becomes clear. In the 1890s, a man versed in the new and dangerous science of electricity (Erik Lochtefeld) is working with a half-mad theatrical genius who plans to open a wildly ambitious attraction timed to the 1890s World Fair. The event depicting Columbus's discovery of America will include stage spectacles that will rival the biggest operas ever seen and the spectacular lighting will boast a constellation of stars covering the proscenium and capped by a dazzling moon.

That's assuming the funding comes through, construction can be completed without killing anyone and the moon embedded with dozens of bulbs can be made to work properly. This period is played for broad laughs for the most part and some rather anachronistic behavior.

In contrast, we also see frantic preparations for another World's Fair in the 1930s, during the height of the Great Depression. This time, instead of an inventor our hero is a failed jingle writer (Ken Barnett) who is just one sale away from becoming a success. He spends his days going from pavilion to pavilion trying to make a deal while his plucky wife toils away at various jobs to keep them afloat. This section is played more seriously, especially since we know the inventor of the first period has locked himself away from the world for decades since.

Despite a game cast and some solid technical work, neither section of *The Light Years* holds any interest on their own. And cutting back and forth simply underlines that lack of innate drama (or comedy, as the case may be). The technical elements are solid though the play itself can't quite inspire greatness. Nonetheless, Laura Jellinek's sets do a lot of heavy lifting in setting the tone for each era and then bringing them together. Ditto the fine costumes of Michael Krass and especially the lighting that's intrinsic to the effects throughout, from the candelight at the start of the show to the moon and constellations we see working fitfully throughout. (Surely a collaboration in many ways between Jellinek's bulb-studded set and the work of Russell H. Champa.)

The cast does its best with very thin material. And thank God Brian Lee Huynh is given a somewhat interesting monologue later showing the passage of time so his part isn't a complete waste. While all are as admirable as can be under the circumstances, Aya Cash genuinely shines in the dual role of the progressive Adeline and the plucky Ruth, creating two fully believable characters that are distinct from one another without belaboring the point. She outshines the play itself, which may be ambitious but cannot begin to justify the strenuous work of putting it on.

SUNDAY IN THE PARK WITH GEORGE **** out of ****

HUDSON THEATRE

As a critic, I try to remember two reasons my experience of theater is atypical. One, I probably have some of the best seats in the house. Two, I haven't paid for them. Reviewing isn't a consumer product survey, but it's helpful to keep in mind that audiences might be paying \$20 for one show or \$200 for another one. And what would it be like from the rear mezzanine? You can't really know but it's useful to keep in mind, for those factors can make a huge difference. In contrast, when for whatever reason I do need or want to buy a ticket to a show, I have the odd relief of not having to prepare to write a review. I can "just" watch it, which is of course what I always try to do. (I've never been one for taking notes or scribbling down thoughts, if I can't remember my thoughts a few hours later than perhaps they weren't that memorable or important in the first place.)

So let me tell you that I bought my ticket to see *Sunday In The Park With George*, paying more than I've ever paid for any Broadway show because I was going to miss this production of one of the greatest musicals of all time and several friends said that would be a very big mistake. I had great seats in a new Broadway house (the Hudson), though not the even better seats I would have enjoyed as a critic. And it

was worth every penny.

You know, or should know, the Pulitzer Prize winning show by Stephen Sondheim. Act One shows the painter Seurat creating his masterpiece but unable to connect with his lover Dot. In Act Two, a spiritual and perhaps literal descendant of Seurat is working on a new art installation and worried he's running out of inspiration. Act One (like Act One of *Into The Woods*) is sheer perfection as written. Act Two, whether you saw the original production with Mandy Patinkin and Bernadette Peters or the excellent *Chocolate Factory* revival (which I luckily saw in London and again on Broadway) is slightly less satisfying somehow but still wonderful. It deepens the beauty of the story and both acts end on glorious grace notes that are exceptionally moving.

This revival began as essentially a concert performance complete with an all-star cast never to be seen again. It was led by Jake Gyllenhaal (proving his turn in *Little Shop Of Horrors* wasn't some fluke) and Annaleigh Ashford as Dot and her granddaughter Marie (proving her Tony Award in 2015 was merely the start of great things). Now it's come to Broadway for a brief run, a semi-staged production that's more than a concert reading and not quite fully tricked out. But it certainly *feels* complete. With just a simple approach, every element here feels precise and correct, such as the white curtain that is placed across the stage with ropes in full view holding it up and a draping at either end, somehow capturing perfectly the idea of a work in progress, the very act of artistic creation.

This time Act Two has overcome the show's biggest hurdle, creating an art installation that can somehow

not feel a letdown compared to the recreation of Seurat's brilliant painting *A Sunday Afternoon On The Island Of La Grande Jatte*. Here the light display dubbed a "Chromolume" is simple, elegant and actually convinces as something that would indeed get commissions and have a vogue in art circles, whatever its ultimate merits. That alone makes Act Two have a coherence and believability it's never had for me before. Ditto the fact that "Putting It Together" — a cynical song about having to glad-hand the press and powerful patrons — feels less like an attempt to be a biting expose and more like a resigned description of the way things are. (And always were; I assume the Medicis also needed ego-stroking.)

Robert Sean Leonard is a very welcome presence as Seurat's rival and later the museum head. And Ashford is marvelous as both Dot and the elderly Marie. She's so good and so gracious with Gyllenhaal that they really feel like a team up there, from their playful chemistry in act one to her lovably doting manner in act two. Gyllenhaal is excellent, surely acting this role as well as anyone ever has. His act one song playing the part of various dogs turns that routine from one of the few problematic elements into a highlight. They connect their two roles so seamlessly that the show has never felt so whole and complete to me, a unified work of perfection.

I've never quite understood why this musical in particular proves so moving to me. When I see it, I always think at the start, Oh this is clever, I really admire it but perhaps it's not — and then suddenly the emotions well up. Is it the lyrics, the way Sondheim so cleverly encapsulated Seurat's style with the elegantly simple idea of writing, "Sunday, by the blue purple yellow red water"? And yet "clever" is so banal a term for genius that marries melody and lyrics and intellectual ideas with heartfelt emotion in such a manner. Is it the chord changes, the orchestrations (brought back from the original in all their prickly, striking glory), the visual charge of seeing the characters lock into place at the end of act one or bowing to their creator (the man that gave them immortality) in act two? It's all of it of course. I'd almost be afraid to see it again so soon but I'm also afraid *not* to see it again before it's gone forever. Such is the torture and gone-too-soon nature of live theater. Don't you miss this if you have the chance to go.

P.S. I know Jake Gyllenhaal is a busy man, but really a few days for Encores and now a few weeks on Broadway is simply not enough. Wouldn't he be ideal as Henry Higgins in the 2018 revival of *My Fair Lady*? In one stroke, they could turn the misogyny of that character into a prickly obsession with his work *and* avoid the May-December casting that has dominated those two great roles for no good reason. If not that, something else and soon so he can have a full rehearsal and stay on in the role and get better and better and then return again in something new after that.

P.P.S. Mr Sondheim, if you need an extra for game night, I'm available. None of my friends are much for playing games and I miss it. Only my sister in London has the fanatic need for games like me and she always insists we learn something new every time I visit. I do like to win and even more I hate to lose, but not in an annoying way. I think.

IDOMENEO AT THE MET *** 1/2 out of ****

METROPOLITAN OPERA

Any chance to see James Levine conduct is not to be missed. That nimbus of hair, light up by the lights in the orchestra pit, is one of the glories of the classical world, a comforting and promising sight ever since I arrived in New York City.

Here that hint of glories to come is fully justified in a revival of Mozart's early masterpiece *Idomeneo*. While the composer livened it up tremendously, this is an old school opera seria done in the grand old style. Happily, this production embraces those virtues rather than fights against them. It boasts a grand but simple set, a large but unobtrusive chorus, illuminating and empathetic work from Levine and his orchestra, and above all glorious singing from the four leads who display a rare generosity by sharing the stage rather than seeming to fight for the spotlight as divas are wont to do.

It's a triumph and happily several performances are left and you can go to the movies for MetLive on Saturday March 25 at 1 pm EST and see it for yourself.

The story is a rare case of a dramatic opera tinged with tragedy and yet boasting a positively happy ending. The king Idomeneo is returning from the Trojan War when he almost drowns. The god Neptune saves him but demands the king sacrifice the first human Idomeneo sees when back on land. The king reluctantly agrees and — no surprise here — the tragic outcome is that the first person the king sees is his beloved son Idamante. To the king's credit, he seemed loathe to keep this cruel vow no matter who it was but of course the fact that it's his son the prince horrifies him.

Unlike that wimp Abraham in the Bible, the King just refuses to do it. He banishes his son and indeed can barely look at him, such is the king's anguish. His son is distraught, naturally, wondering what he's done to disappoint his father. At the same time, the prince Idamante is frustrated in love. He's fallen in love with the captive princess Ilia. She too loves him, but his people have slaughtered her family and friends so she's naturally a little conflicted about it and won't admit her feelings of admiration and love. Meanwhile, the princess Elektra wants the prince for herself, though no one else seems to know this desire.

Neptune is enraged when the king refuses to kill his son. Nonetheless the king demands Idamante escort Elektra home. If nothing else, he recognizes the son has fallen for Ilia and at least wants to spare her the sorrow of seeing her lover die. Neptune sends a serpent to wreck havoc on their kingdom. The people are distraught and want to know what the king has done to piss off Neptune. Finally, the king admits it, along with the fact that he's offered himself as a sacrifice instead. The prince offers himself as a willing sacrifice. The princess Ilia offers herself as a willing sacrifice. And finally Neptune admits he's been kind of a dick and gives up on the whole sacrifice thing, "demanding" the king step down and let the prince reign instead. Which is no big deal and everyone is overjoyed and it's a happy ever after except for Elektra who demands revenge and collapses in self-pity at the end.

That's the story but the glory is in the music and the singing. All the leads are superb. Matthew Polenzani is commanding and heartfelt as the king. Nadine Sierra is beautiful and utterly winning as the demure but persistent princess Ilia. I feared she was acting a bit too much with her costume in Act One but she calmed down a bit and her acting and singing were quite delightful. Idamante is a trouser role and was played here by Alice Coote. While some of the elements this brings out are purely a modern imposition on the role, it's still present for audiences and quite moving whether you find yourself mediating on gender or sexual orientation or simply the pain of a child believing themselves to be rejected for any reason by their parent. Or forget all that and just glory in Coote's sadness and confusion while bringing Idamante to life in all his pain and fortitude. And Elza van den Heever simply reveled in the bitchy maneuvering of Elektra. Her black costume was a glorious battleship of a thing and Heever turned every move from one part of the stage to another into a stately progression of clueless self-satisfaction. Her every tilt of the head amused, her every turn of the body spoke volumes and it was a comic (but never never jokey) performance equalled and indeed surpassed by her thrilling vocals. She collapsed at the end and was carried off stage to well-deserved applause.

The direction was simplicity itself, never trying to gussy up the traditional tale and its presentation with unnecessary flash. Mozart's music and vocal lines had plenty of that on tap. When the four leads approached the edge of the stage in act three and each of them confessed their inner turmoil one after the other, back and forth, it was a display of sustained excellence and rare uniformity of purpose one rarely sees in opera stars of this calibre. If their lifetimes of sacrifice and study prepared them just for this moment, it was worth it.

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

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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.