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HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Theater: McKellen! Stewart! Beckett! Pinter!

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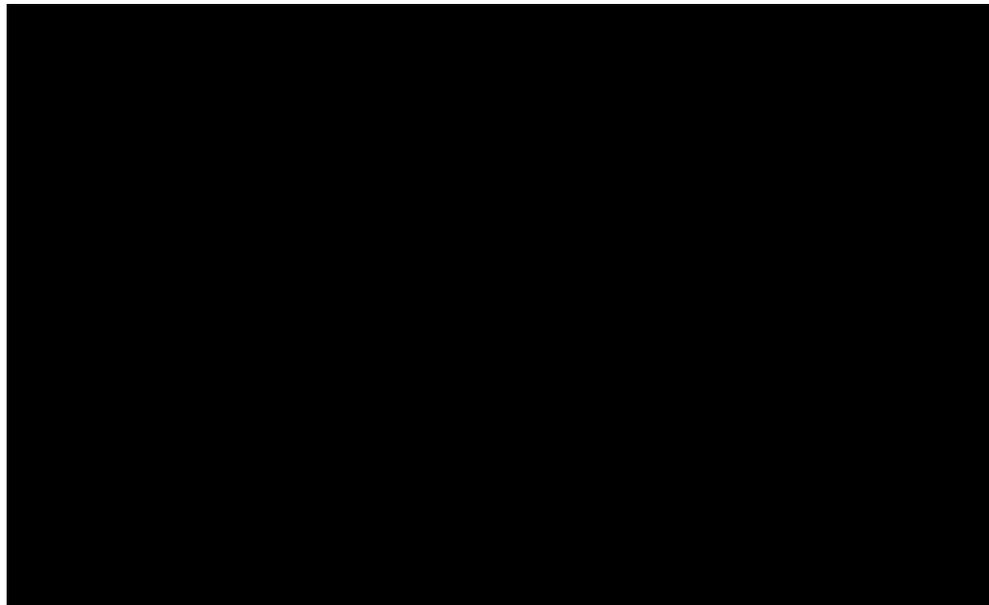
WAITING FOR GODOT ** 1/2 out of ****

NO MAN'S LAND *** out of ****

CORT THEATRE

It's a rare treat on Broadway to have two groups of actors tackling plays in repertory. Mark Rylance and friends from the Globe in London are presenting Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *Richard III*, while Ian McKellen and Patrick Stewart are reprising their West End success with two modernist classics, *Waiting For Godot* and *No Man's Land*. They are joined by Billy Crudup and Shuler Hensley and truly half the fun is getting to see these accomplished performers in dramatically different settings one right after the other. (I know some make it an all day marathon, with one in the afternoon and one at night, but that's a bit too much nihilism for me.)

We can scorecard the plays (Beckett vs. Pinter!), we can scorecard the actors (McKellen vs. Stewart! Crudup vs. Hensley!), and we can scorecard these particular productions. But whatever your reactions to any particular element (most everyone agrees *Twelfth Night* is the triumph for Rylance in their two-fer, while opinion is divided on these two), it's safe to say these are "events" in the best sense of the word, nights of theater you want to see and judge for yourself.



In *Godot*, McKellen and Stewart play Laurel & Hardy in a blasted landscape, forever holding vigil and waiting -- fruitlessly -- for the appearance of Godot. Godot is their only salvation, the only thing that gives their lives meaning and Godot (spoiler alert!) will never come. It's easy to understand -- thanks to numerous references to Christ on the cross --

why *Godot* is often seen as a stand-in for God. But it's as much a mistake to immediately dissect the show for its meaning as it is to fearfully play it as vaudevillian as everyone seems intent on doing in this production.

Our two Sirs have the right spirit, but Hensley comes barreling in as Pozzo with Lucky (Crudup) on a leash and subtlety or depth of emotion are out of the question. I've never seen a great *Godot*, but somehow I always love the play itself. It's damned difficult to get right (much like Chekhov) and it's always worth trying.

The set by Stephen Brimson Lewis was evocative enough, though one hole (or is it a shallow grave?) loomed rather large given its lack of importance. He also did the clothes and they were spot-on for our two leads, though Pozzo and Lucky's attire pushed the circus shtick too much for my taste. That performance aspect is emphasized by Crudup's Kabuki-like make-up and puppet-like hair designed by Tom Watson.

But the real problem was the lighting by Peter Kaczorowski and sound design by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen. Every change in time is intensely indicated, with day so clearly day and night so clearly night that no sense of the passage of time can take hold. Worst of all is the moon, presented as a large circular white spotlight filling up much of the stage. For whatever reason, I found it so banally literal (even though no moon ever cast such a glow) that it yanked me out of the show. It was neither subtly realistic enough nor teasingly metaphoric to suggest depths. It was just...there.

As for the sound, the actors were sometimes miked and sometimes not, sometimes their voices echoed -- again, with heavy-handed literalism -- such as when one bellowed into a ditch. It called attention to itself, which is something the sound design should never do. Mind you, they weren't helped at the unfortunate performance I saw, which was plagued by a traffic jam of some sort taking place right outside the Cort Theatre accompanied by more horn honking than I have ever heard in 20 years of theater-going.

All of this falls away when you focus on the actors. I realize I've missed all of Hensley's most acclaimed performances, such as his recent work in *The Whale*, so I don't have the fondness for him that I should. Crudup is clearly a creature of the stage and has beguiled me many times. They are a good physical team, Hensley large and imposing and Crudup thin and pliable. If you're going to go for gusto, Hensley is surely right to go all out, drawling and stomping and bellowing non-stop. Crudup has almost no dialogue and is stronger for it, doing great bits of physical business. He also has the evening's most daunting challenge, an epic monologue when Lucky is asked to "think." It's a tumble of words and ideas and subconscious despair made vocal and the rhythm of it unfortunately escaped him on the night I attended.

Far better were McKellen and Stewart. One could say McKellen wiped the floor with Stewart (certainly my guest did) and there's no question he was mesmerizing as the quarrelsome Estragon, with his ill-fitting shoes and hunger for carrots and even deeper hunger for an end to this endless waiting. But I'd say Stewart provided the straight man as Vladimir. Their comic interplay -- such as a trading back and forth of hats that's pure silent movie slapstick -- is delightful to behold.

But exactly how funny is *Godot* supposed to be? The ads for any production invariably emphasize the humor quotient (understandably) and clearly comedy is present here. You'd be foolish *not* to mine the humor present in the banter and physical bits of business Beckett has offered. But this isn't exactly *Boeing Boeing* and yet that's practically how every production I've seen has tackled it. It's as if they're so worried about the show's daunting legend as an existential classic that they can't go a minute without a little pie in the face. Audiences are just as eager; they're always keyed up for laughter and seem to giggle out of fear they won't "get" it. Hopefully some day I'll see a *Godot* that actually embraces the despair and bleakness of the story. Let the humor pierce the gloom rather than laugh-track it out of existence.

Pinter's *No Man's Land* is just as unsettling, though its setting seems a tad more solid. Two mature gentlemen, one well-dressed (Stewart as Hirst) and one down on his luck

(McKellen as the threadbare Spooner) are having drinks in an elegant if bare sitting room. Spooner holds forth while the dour (drunk? tired?) Hirst offers up a rare grunt of encouragement. When we think we know what's going on (they met at a pub or perhaps the rambles near a pub) and suspect a certain sexual undercurrent, our expectations are disturbed. In burst two men, clearly servants of Hirst, the burly Briggs (Hensley) and the street-wise talker Foster (Crudup). A battle of wills takes place as the two shady figures try to maintain their hold on this wealthy patron.

All of this is upended yet again in act two, where suddenly Hirst and Spooner seem to be old acquaintances, with Hirst blithely telling Spooner he had a torrid affair with the other man's wife. Again and again, every time we think we sense the way things are going, our understanding is twisted in a new way. It's delightfully disorienting and this time every element of the production is in key. Unfortunately, Hensley and Crudup do not convey the crucial menace that would turn this take on Pinter from a strong outing to a stellar one. You should fear death when they turn on you; here, at most, you worry they might be rather chagrined.

Still everyone involved has high points that stay with you. Hensley is masterful when telling a story about meeting his partner Foster. It involves a section of town bedeviled by one-way streets: you can get in there but you can never get out and some people have wandered them for years with no end in sight. Crudup's accent may be a little dodgy but he repeatedly offers subtle bits of business that enliven the proceedings without ever upstaging the others, a model of skill and restraint.

But Stewart and McKellen are remarkable here. McKellen continues his excellent work from *Godot* while Stewart delivers one of his best stage performances I've seen, ranging from helpless old man to powerful figure to blue-blooded indifference without ever missing a beat. His befuddled, confused character at the start is a marvel, with McKellen glorying in intense dialogue while Stewart returns serve with the merest raising of an eyebrow. The second act monologue where he expounds on dallying with McKellen's wife and then dismisses it all as so much fluff with a wave of his hand and an indifferent phrase is hilarious.

So much is embedded in this work, this constant battle between forces: the rich versus the poor, the employed versus the unemployed, the successful versus the failure, the talented versus the hack, the sober versus the drunk, the sane versus the senile, the straight versus the gay, the young versus the old, the sexually active versus the dormant (or extinct) and on and on. And surely dementia -- so much better understood today by so many -- looms over this play for us more prominently than it did on its debut.

McKellen's plea for a job, eloquent and insistent and overflowing, goes on and on and on...and then he adds one more thing, pirouetting into an offer to stage a reading for the apparently esteemed man of letters that is Hirst. The castle has not been breached but McKellen will not stop looking for a weakness in the walls. On and on he talks, leaving us all spellbound. And then Stewart says simply, "Let's change the subject," to gales of laughter. But it's a wincing laughter as we see the desperation in McKellen's eyes, not to mention the relief in the two servants who immediately belittle McKellen and work to shore up their own positions. Director Sean Mathias hasn't nailed these shows to the wall but he has at least provided an environment where moments of greatness can be achieved. Crudup is surely taking notes since he'll be handling the leads in years to come.

Pinter's play is every bit the blasted landscape of Beckett's *Godot* despite its literal setting (the ceiling is topped by shadows of trees and open to the sky, an evocative touch that gives McKellen a funny bit of business early on). Both are set in a no man's land of hopelessness, though how hopeless can things be when art still offers solace? That's the real tug of war between these shows: they see the abyss so clearly, we are fooled into believing we can laugh it off or at least skirt around it. For a while.

P.S. Stewart hasn't performed his one-man *A Christmas Carol* in the US in more than a decade. He last did it in London eight years ago. Surely, 2014 or 2015 will prove long enough to wait? If he needs to book another TV series to be forced into a holiday

diversion, then so be it.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2
Picnic * 1/2
Opus No. 7 ** 1/2
Deceit * 1/2
Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **
Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2
The Jammer ***
Blood Play ** 1/2
Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2
Women Of Will ** 1/2
All In The Timing ***
Isaac's Eye ***
Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2
The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2
Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***

Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice **no stars**
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical **no stars**
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *
Women Or Nothing ** 1/2
Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play * 1/2
You Never Can Tell ***
Romeo And Juliet *
Arguendo **
August Wilson's American Century Cycle ****
The Glass Menagerie ** 1/2
Lady Day * 1/2
Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse ****
Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical ** 1/2
Bronx Bombers * 1/2
Romeo & Juliet at CSC * 1/2
A Night With Janis Joplin **
The Winslow Boy ***
Juno And The Paycock **
How I Learned To Drive **
Fun Home **
Two Boys at the Met **
Big Fish **
A Time To Kill * 1/2
Year Of The Rooster ***
The Snow Geese ** 1/2
A Midsummer Night's Dream ** 1/2
The Lady in Red Converses With Diablo ** 1/2
After Midnight ***
La Soiree ***
Nothing To Hide ** 1/2

*The Patron Saint Of Sea Monsters ***

Die Frau Ohne Schatten/The Woman Without A Shadow at the Met

*Little Miss Sunshine ***

*Souvenir ** 1/2*

*A Gentleman's Guide To Love & Murder *** 1/2*

*Twelfth Night *** 1/2*

*King Richard The Third ****

*Lies My Father Told Me ***

*Regular Singing ***

*And Away We Go ***

*Analog.ue at St. Ann's Warehouse ** 1/2*

*Oliver! at Papermill ***

*Waiting For Godot ** 1/2*

*No Man's Land ****

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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.*

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