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MOURNING BECOMES ELECTRA \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

A DOLL'S HOUSE, PART 2 \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

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ABRON ARTS CENTER AT HENRY STREET SETTLEMENT

No American playwright can match the influential importance of Eugene O'Neill. Like Louis Armstrong with jazz, O'Neill was there at the beginning of this country's theatrical birth. You'd have to go back in time to compete with him. Even fewer artists grew stronger and stronger throughout their careers, with O'Neill delivering most of the great dramas we remember him for today towards the end of his lengthy and prolific artistic life. Really it's the final four years of his work — in which O'Neill penned *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, *A Moon For The Misbegotten*, *A Touch Of The Poet* and *Hughie* — that serve as his great claim to fame. This means huge chunks of his plays (especially the one-acts) are often overlooked. And this despite the fact that he won the Pulitzer Prize *three times* before that late career flowering.

So what a treat this season to get two major O'Neill works under my belt. First came a marvelous revival of *The Hairy Ape* starring Bobby Cannavale at the Armory. It was, if nothing else, a spectacle: making use of that huge space, *The Hairy Ape* seated the audience in bleachers reaching up to the sky, with a circular ring of a stage revolving *around* the seats. Looming into view would be a set containing the bowels of the ship and then it would slide away to the right and behind, with another set coming into view from the left. The performances were pitched to the heavens and made sense of O'Neill's heavily didactic text. I don't think I've ever been so keenly aware of seeing an excellent revival of a play that I really would NOT want to see done in a straightforward style. I don't think *The Hairy Ape* would withstand the scrutiny.

Now Target Margin has tackled the sprawling three part epic *Mourning Becomes Electra* and they too have pulled out all the stops. Audiences are immersed into the action of this five hour event right from the start. It begins in the lobby and then the viewers are shepherded (or is that merely herded?) into the aisles of the

theater for a few short minutes and then shooed upstairs to the balcony for the rest of part one. It's back downstairs into the back of the theater's orchestra seating for part two and then a brief moment towards the front of the theater before we're brought onstage for an intimate final rendition of part three. The finale gives us the rare glimpse of a show ending and the curtain falling from the perspective of the stage, while the actors are outside facing in.

They employ every avant-garde trick in the book, from toying with the audio mix to odd little hand gestures underlining certain bits of dialogue and then mumbling for a moment or two to indicate passages they have cut from the text. I've no doubt that they have a motivation for every element of this production, just like every other deconstruction of a text I've seen. It remains an eternal mystery to me why sometimes seemingly random actions maintain such power while at other times they feel random and annoying. In contrast to *The Hairy Ape*, here, I fear, they remained resolutely random and without impact.



PHOTO BY KELLY STUART COPYRIGHT 2017

A scene from Target Margin's "Mourning Becomes Electra"

I grew uneasy right at the start when Mary Neufeld stumbled a bit through Lincoln's beautiful and succinct Second Inaugural Address despite reading from a copy of it. (She was intentionally hammy and broad throughout, playing multiple roles and asked to carry on conversations with herself in an unhelpful manner.) More importantly, why were we herded into the aisles of the theater (but not the seats) while we could hear dialogue from the play beginning, only to hear them again once we stood around uneasily wondering what to

do, only to be sent upstairs for the rest of the first part? It felt pointless and unnecessarily controlling, more a stunt or a tease of site-specific staging rather than the actual thing.

Similarly, in part two we sat in the back of the theater while scenes were performed mostly on stage. Actors not appearing in the scene at hand often sat in the empty seats in front of us. Seemingly at random, they would jump up and move to different seats and sit back down. Again, I'm sure this had some unknown motivation. But when these sorts of gambits are done well, you don't question them — they have a ritualistic power or speak to the actors enough that they convince us with their commitment. Instead, all we saw was a mad, silly scramble.

The performances were also all over the map, intentionally so. Sometimes the scenes were played naturally; other times like high melodrama and others with a knowing meta sort of commentary. That's when they weren't repeating lines in a stylized manner and offering up strange hand gestures, the sort of thing director Robert Wilson can create at will but which escapes so many others.

Unlike *The Hairy Ape*, the frustrating fact was that when the actual drama hove into view, I was eager to hear more. Based on the Greek tragedy *The Oresteia*, it features the decline and fall of a once-proud family at the end of the Civil War. The wife of a returning hero has taken a new lover and plots her husband's death. Their daughter — loyal to her father and played for a fool by her mother's new lover — plots *their* death. And finally the son is torn over guilt for slaying his mother's lover and thus driving her to suicide (and also perhaps desire for his sister?) and kills himself. It's all deeply tragic but when the pyrotechnics fell quiet, it was compelling or at least interesting.

Despite all the demands and distractions, the cast for the most part acquitted themselves well. Stephanie Weeks cut a striking figure as the scheming wife, Eunice Wong was formidable as the rigidly determined daughter and Satya Bhabha did yeoman's work as the father, the son *and* the new lover. The idea of indicating where text was deleted by having the actors mumble for a moment or two actually proved effective. But of all the technical tricks, the most intriguing gambit was the work of sound designer (and director) David Herskovits and presumably sound demon Jesse Freedman. Rather strikingly, certain lines of dialogue were fed through body mikes, creating a sense of intimacy and confession, turning even scenes between two people into a sort of monologue of the soul. As with so much else, it was hard to discern any pattern to this approach and when it was used, but it was a notable element that paid off...and would have paid off more if used with more intent.

I don't think there's any major American playwright whose work is less seen than O'Neill. I still long for the chance to see *Beyond The Horizon*, *Anna Christie* and *Strange Interlude* (Pulitzer Prize winners all!), not to mention *Ah Wilderness* and *Desire Under The Elms* and so many one acts. Despite this ambitious but confused effort, I also still long to see *Mourning Becomes Electra*.

A DOLL'S HOUSE, PART 2 \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

## GOLDEN THEATRE

Here's my blurb: "Hilarious! *A Doll's House, Part 2* is twice as funny as the original!" That's the joke I made with friends before seeing this new play by Lucas Hnath. Now that I've actually seen it, I'd happily bump that up to "three times as funny" or "five times as funny" if it will get people to check out what is unquestionably one of the wittiest, sharpest shows of 2017. Four American works are up for the Best Play Tony and all mark a welcome debut on the Great White Way for their authors. *A Doll's House, Part 2* has worthy competition in *Oslo* for the big prize. (The other two are the admirable *Indecent* and the Pulitzer Prize winner *Sweat*.) But after my first viewing of both, I think *Oslo* is a good play given an excellent production while *A Doll's House, Part 2* is a great play given a great production.

Hnath has been on the radar of anyone paying attention to theater for a number of years now. Seeing his early work *Isaac's Eye* in a tiny Off Off Off Broadway space (the Ensemble Studio Theatre) was a genuine thrill — the first act was exceptional, the second act good and you just knew you were watching an artist find his voice. Since then I've seen most everything Hnath has done that I could, including *The Christians*, *Red Speedo* and *A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney*. Each one has toyed with presentation; more significantly, each one has wrestled with ethics, with right and wrong. I've admired the hell out of them and waited for Hnath to raise his game by injecting more emotional heart into his worthy intellectual proceedings.

Now, with what seemed like an absurdist lark, he's done it. This sequel to Ibsen's landmark work *A Doll's House* begins 15 years after Nora slammed the door on her old life, looking for independence and a new sense of selfhood separate from the confining roles of wife and mother. Though she definitely broke with the past, the past has not broken with her. Nora's husband was meant to file for divorce. But after fifteen years of taking lovers and signing contracts and doing business as an independent woman, Nora discovers she and Torvald are in fact still married. This puts her into legal and moral jeopardy (and presumably annoys the hell out of her as well). Nora returns home where she is reminded of her second class citizenship — yet again, Torvald holds all the cards, at least legally.

In a taut, hilarious and subtly moving 90 minutes, Nora cajoles and argues and gets an earful from first her husband's faithful servant Anne Marie (who raised the children Nora left behind), then her daughter Emmy and finally Torvald himself. Spiced with just the right unexpected dash of modern language and sensibility, this is a tour de force of ideas. In it, a trailblazer examines the scorched earth she left behind and asks herself if it was worth the price.

A lesser playwright would have done only some of what Hnath accomplishes here. They would have thought, “Was Torvald that bad? And what about the kids? She left her kids behind! Man, Nora was kind of a jerk!” They would have piled on, showing the many thoughtless ways in which Nora failed to account for the other people in her life. Sure, she deserved her agency; but did everyone around her have to pay such a high price for her to gain it? Much comedic and dramatic humor would be mined and the play would have remained merely a stunt, a banal switching of perspectives. You’ve heard Nora’s side; now hear theirs!

Hnath’s play is much better than that. He mines the nervy — if silly — idea of writing a sequel to *A Doll’s House* for all those elements. But that’s just the start. The tug of war over what Nora did and how each of these people once in her life feel about it is utterly engaging. Yet it’s no accident that we also get three different women of three different ages and three social classes fully portrayed here: a young woman of respectable standing, the middle-aged Nora who is scandalously independent (and independently wealthy) and the elderly servant dependent on Nora’s husband for every crust of bread. As always with Hnath, right and wrong are the stuff of high drama (and comedy).

And no one can truly gang up on Nora, a woman who has grown only stronger in her years alone. She doesn’t argue away the genuine concerns of others, but listens and accepts and acknowledges them. (Not in any tiresomely “decent” manner either but sometimes defensively, sometimes bitingly and sometimes a little abashed.) Nora begins the show with a rather hilarious call for the death of marriage, that outdated institution she imagines will wither away in 20 or 30 years time, at most. It’s funny because it’s so sharp and true and timeless. (If she had the terms, Nora might embrace polyamory.) We’re immediately made aware of how sadly timeless the plea for equality remains in the world.

Everyone is true to themselves, playing off the classic original play and yet also managing to surprise simply by the way Hnath brings them to new life. Like any great play of ideas (think *Copenhagen* or *Arcadia*), *A Doll’s House, Part 2* works precisely because those ideas flow through characters that are deeply human.

The cast is excellent and all four are deservedly nominated for Tonys. Chris Cooper is still finding his sea legs

onstage in terms of projecting his voice. But he's a solid presence and grows in humanity as the play progresses. Jayne Houdyshell is a treat as the servant; frankly, it's just fun to hear her cursing Nora out. Condola Rashad is sensational as Nora's daughter, finding a tricky and hilarious rhythm to her dialogue that is simply priceless. Emmy may have discovered a very different purpose in life, but there's no doubting this is Nora's daughter. And Laurie Metcalf is a joy in this unlikely role she digs into with gusto. Director Sam Gold (who also delivered the excellent revival of *The Glass Menagerie*) is in top form here.

I am delighted the Tony Awards were smart enough to recognize the quietly clever costumes of David Zinn, but it's almost shocking they didn't acknowledge the brilliant set of Miriam Buether. You walk into the theater and immediately relax: you're in good hands, you think, as you spot the somehow hilarious sight of a yellow lighted sign hanging from the ceiling that sports the play's title. (Is it the font that's so funny?) The set juts forward into the theater, with two walls converging in the back, four chairs against those walls and that infamous door on stage right. It's simple and elegant and Gold combines it with the Tony-nominated lighting of Jennifer Tipton and projection design of Peter Nigrini to brilliant effect.

At times Nora and Anne Marie are poised at the tip of the stage, peering out into the audience. At other times, actors find themselves trapped in that constricting little corner in the back. When a major confrontation begins, the scene freezes, the lights dim and a gigantic projection of the name of the character Nora is dealing with (such as "EMMY") appears dramatically on the walls, a la the films of Godard. It's arresting, eye-catching and somehow exactly right.

A cast in top form, a director and creative team on fire and all of them in service to the text of a playwright brilliantly coming into his own? It doesn't get much better than that. I haven't been this eager to read a play I just saw in a long time, so perhaps Tom Stoppard is the right lofty comparison to make. Like that playwright's best, you leave the theater smiling, ready to argue and debate what you saw and eager to see whatever Lucas Hnath writes next.

(Tip to theatergoers buying seats — as close as possible is just fine. Even in the front row, you'll have a great view and since the actors are often placed towards the back of the set, even the front row often feels like the sixth or eighth row of a traditional staging. Yes, you might have to tilt your head a bit, but it's 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

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips \*\*

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) \*

Come From Away \*

Miss Saigon \*\*

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba \* 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s \*\*

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) \*\*\*

Latin History For Morons \* 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production)

Wakey Wakey \*\*\*

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) \*\*\*

CasablancaBox \*\* 1/2

Amélie \* 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong \*\*

Indecent \*\* 1/2

The Hairy Animal \*\*\*

The Antipodes \*\*

Anastasia \*\*

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory \*\*

Oslo \*\*\* 1/2

The Little Foxes \*\*

Groundhog Day \*\* 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O'Hara at Carnegie Hall) \*\* 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra \*\*

A Doll's House, Part 2 \*\*\* 1/2

Six Degrees Of Separation \*\*

Bandstand \*\* 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.***