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IT'S ONLY A PLAY *** out of ****

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GERALD SCHOENFELD THEATRE

Is it the mysteriously magical pairing of Nathan Lane and Matthew Broderick? Is it the uneasy times we are (always) in? Is it the economy, which is depressing if not officially Depression-ing? I don't know. But rarely if ever have I heard an audience hungrier for a show than the preview audience that greeted this one. The moment the lights began to dim, the buzzing crowd burst into loud applause. Yes! Yes! Make us laugh! Almost every actor got entrance applause, as if this were an old movie and we were seeing an imaginary depiction of how Broadway audiences used to act at a show. The only actor who didn't get entrance applause was the unknown Micah Stock and damned if he didn't get (deserved) exit applause.

Do you know where the laugh tracks from sitcoms came from? They were originally recordings of actual live audiences reacting in pleasure to the performance of a show. The audience at It's Only A Play is the sort of audience you'd want to record so you could play it back and make other shows seem funnier than they were. They roared at every theatrical in-joke. They laughed at every pratfall. They oooooohed deliciously at catty comments and believe me, there were many catty comments. Not since the British laughed themselves silly during a performance of James Corden in One Man, Two Guvnors at the National in London have I so enjoyed an audience's enjoyment of a show.

Is this a comedy for the ages? No, it's silly fun delivered in spades by an all-star cast that hams it up with abandon. It has some slow passages and has several endings as they try to scale the peaks again a la the masterpiece Noises Off. Personally, I appreciated the longueurs: they gave the people around me a chance to catch their breath.

Here's a montage of scenes from the show courtesy of Broadway.com.

The setting is opening night of a new Broadway show. The after party at the home of producer Julia Budder (Megan Mullally) is all a-tingle waiting for the reviews. Or should I say review, since the only review that usually matters is that of the lead critic from the New York Times. (Some things never change.)

It's a backstage comedy, but we're actually behind the scenes of this behind the scenes setting. The entire play takes place in the bedroom of Budder where a coat check boy and struggling actor Gus P. Head (Stock) is piling up coat after coat from the arriving guests. Dim but sweet, Gus strikes up a conversation with James Wicker (Lane), the star of a wildly successful sitcom and erstwhile best friend of the playwright Peter Austin (Broderick).

Wicker is feeling guilty because the play was dreadful and he's certain it'll get horrible reviews. Thank God he turned it down on the lamest excuse, but it's still going to be an awful evening. Also along for the ride is movie star Virginia Noyes (Stockard Channing), who has returned to the stage in desperation; brilliant and obnoxious

young director Frank Finger (Rupert Grint), who feels a fraud and longs for a bad review; and waspish theater critic Ira Drew (F. Murray Abraham). Pretty soon everyone is cramming into the bedroom, sharing put-downs and desperately insincere compliments and genuine emotions that rise to the surface on this most stressful of nights.

Oh, you can take it from there. Playwright Terrence McNally keeps the jokes coming fast and furious. And thank God he updated many of the lines or you'd need an annotated edition to catch all the zingers that meant something to hardcore theatergoers back in 1978 when it was first written. (I want to assume the jokes about Barbra Streisand and Liza Minnelli are the same, which would make them even funnier if so.) Here it is, a huge hit for as long as this cast wants to keep it going, when the original production closed out of town some 36 years ago. Only in the theater.

Not all of it tracks. The slow passages center on the playwright holding forth about Art. And a coat check boy who is none too bright? You'd think the one thing he'd know about is TV but this star of a sitcom that has been a big hit for nine seasons means nothing to him? Hardly. And yet, he later makes a joke by answering the telephone saying "Heartbreak House." Is this consistent? Who cares? It's funny.

The tech elements are first-rate throughout. The scenic design of Scott Pask avoids easy laughs but the slightly tacky chandelier in the producer's bedroom hints her taste might not be of the best sort. The costumes of Ann Roth are similarly fun and telling without poking you in the ribs with their silliness, with the forgivable exception of Grint's British director. And the sound design of Fitz Patton is also subtly supportive of the humor, keeping the off-stage party a notable but un-distracting presence.

But we're here for the jokes, for a down-the-middle comedy with some big belly laughs and everyone knows it, from director Jack O'Brien straight down to newcomer Stock. Like the wide-eyed actor wannabe he plays in the show, Stock surely felt jitters amidst a cast that is elbow to elbow with stars. Yet he holds his own and avoids the pitfalls of over-acting in a droll performance that practically steals the show. Channing and Mullally delight as an insecure star and a should-be-insecure producer. Abraham's theater critic takes some left turns but he too keeps things admirably focused.

This is not a deep play -- just a valentine to the theater, replete with frenemies and everyone relishing the nasty reviews of their nightmares. The lure of mugging must have been extreme. Yet O'Brien keeps things in hand. The one left off his leash is Grint, who is a relative newbie to the stage. He goes all out as the egotistical genius and while much of it doesn't land, he just keeps on going and maintains his own nutty believability.

Then there's Broderick, an actor I have a deep affection for who has been so talented as an actor, director and writer on stage and film. His last show was the somewhat anonymous musical Nice Work If You Can Get It. Broderick had injured his back, so his tamped-down performance there seemed explainable. Yet here again he seems notably, almost perversely subdued: everyone else is delivering be-bop comedy and Broderick is stuck in bossa nova mode. He seems to be in an entirely different play. It's uncomfortably clear that the valleys here often center on his character and I'm unsure as to whether the blame lies with McNally, Broderick or probably a combination of both.

Still, he can't help landing the laughs. And the modest emotional confrontation between the bitter playwright and his far more successful friend is given genuine depth..until it happily builds into another silly scene. His partner in that moment is Lane who I will happily take for granted. "Harvey Fierstein?" he asks, staring off into the distance, garnering multiple laughs as he repeats the line again and again during one comic passage. He's wonderfully generous with Stock, giving slow burn like nobody's business. His turn in The Nance (also directed by the excellent O'Brien) was a tour de force. Here he's doing exactly what The Nance celebrated: high calibre comedy of the lowest variety.

It's all too easy to imagine a very tired production of this work. Lesser hands wouldn't elevate McNally's modest

but amusing silliness. Even six months into the run might dull their edges. But here, with this fresh cast and an audience that for god's sake just wants to laugh for a few hours, it's enough. It's Only A Play and only a comedy at that and Eugene O'Neil will rest easy in his grave. But who cares? Only funny? That ain't easy.

THE CURIOUS INCIDENT OF THE DOG IN THE NIGHT-TIME * 1/2 out of ****** **ETHEL BARRYMORE THEATRE**

Director Marianne Elliott clearly has a gift for visual flair. She helmed War Horse, that most unlikely play based on a novel about a horse. Now she's done it again with The Curious Incident Of The Dog In The Night-Time, based on the acclaimed novel by Mark Haddon. That book famously plopped one down into the consciousness of a teenage boy slightly bewildered by the world around him and clearly dealing with a condition, likely Asperger's Syndrome or some such form of autism. It's a book whose entire effect depends on the narrative voice of a boy, one who doesn't quite understand what's happening; it's cleverness and impact derives from that voice and our understanding of what he can't quite grasp.

Doing that as a play makes almost no sense, at first blush. But the voice of Christopher is funny in its blunt literalness, touching in its open confusion, and piercingly vulnerable as we grasp the turmoil of his life, from a mother who simply couldn't handle the demands of a child that is so challenging to raise to a father clumsily doing his best to a world that scares and intimidates him.

Playwright Simon Stephens realized that voice would work on stage, especially if we remained with Christopher's point of view, just like the book. A black box staging that includes dramatic paneling on the sides and back and floor of the stage filled with diodes and projections let's us literally feel like we're inside the mind of Christopher as he nominally tries to solve the mystery of a neighbor's murdered dog (Christopher loves the cold logic of Sherlock Holmes). More importantly, he tries to grasp the complexities of what other people are thinking. They rarely say what they mean and even when they try to they use metaphors and polite euphemisms and it's all tiresome and maddening and downright annoying.

If this all sounds too intellectual, far from it. Curious Incident is very much alive and to my mind an improvement on the book. Once you got the voice of the character and the ironic distance between what he understands of the world and the reality, I found it a little static if consistently clever. On stage, however, we see the people Christopher interacts with and their frustration and love and gentleness and anger bring the story alive in all its messy realness, from a dissolved marriage to a burst of cruelty to well-meaning if clueless strangers that cross the path of this endearingly unique fellow.

I say endearing, but he's not; not really. This play is consistently dazzling in its presentation. But it is most engaging as a work of theater, not of the heart. Once or twice, we see the pain of his mother (Enid Graham) when Christopher can't give the emotional response she desperately needs. Can't she hold his hand, just for a moment, just for her, she asks at one point? But he doesn't like holding hands; that's simply not in his skill set. And if you want an emotional epiphany from our hero, you will not be satisfied. The most emotional he gets is when taking his math A levels (sort of like the UK equivalent to the SATs) and wants to explain his proof to the audience. That emotional distance is the discerning insight on offer and Curious Incident doesn't soft-soap it.

Mind you, Christopher does react with pleasure to a puppy but even here you can see the pain it causes his mother. Christopher can accept being licked by a puppy and hug it to his chest even though contact from an adult -- even his parents -- is painfully difficult and usually sets him off to screaming. That's just how he's built.

His story is a spectacle, just like War Horse and for that alone a show not to be missed this season. It's a true group effort and every technical element is superb and works in concert with the direction and acting, from the choreography of Scott Graham & Steven Hoggett (a brilliant fusing of the ensemble and our hero that humanizes him throughout if only in the context of the performance) to the music of Adrian Sutton. The first act stays within Christopher's mind quite nimbly. The second act, in which he takes a dangerous and confounding

journey to London, pulls out the stops from a train ride to a heart-stopping subway platform bit of suspense. Whether Christopher is dreaming of being an astronaut and the walls fill with stars and the ensemble floats him in the air or he falls to the ground and curls up into a ball as the sensory overload of life becomes too much, every element of the show is seamless in working towards the same vivid sensation. You'll simply have to read every single credit to see all those involved who have triumphed here.

Of course, it needs a strong cast. The ensemble is excellent and the leads very good indeed, from his teacher Siobhan (a warm Francesca Faridany) to Mercedes Herrero in numerous turns but especially an exasperated administrator to the estimable Helen Carey especially as the kindly neighbor Mrs. Alexander to Ian Barford as Christopher's dad. Making his Broadway -- indeed theatrical debut -- is Alex Sharp, who needn't bother with final exams if he hasn't actually received his degree from Juilliard yet. (Apparently he did graduate in May.) Luke Treadaway confirmed his rising star playing the part in the West End, bringing an unexpected sexiness and maturity to this boy-man. The only fear about the transfer to Broadway by those who saw it was that no one could match Treadaway.

I didn't see him so have nothing to compare. Clearly Sharp brings a nerdier sensibility to the part, more boy than man, more vulnerable than clumsily defensive. It's an awfully challenging role of a very particular sort. He's emotional yet cool, brilliant yet dense, needy yet all too self-contained and Sharp plays him wonderfully. It's an auspicious debut and while meteoric success can be overwhelming, it's a lovely problem to face.

Still, all in all, I felt a detachment while watching the show, one that is in fact quite appropriate given the story being told. Anyone can enjoy the spectacle and appreciate the craft but shouldn't a great work offer more? It came rather unexpectedly after the cast took their bows. A toss-away line during the show when Christopher started to explain the proof of a math problem said it might not be that exciting and he should save it for after the show is over.

Recognizing a promise when I heard one, I didn't budge as the cast took their bows, left the stage and people began to leave the theater. Sure enough, Sharp as Christopher triumphantly pops back onto the stage and excitedly says he'll explain his proof of one of his favorite questions from the exam he took during the show. Most everyone was still in the theater (I pity those who dashed out) and stopped happily as Christopher typically detailed all the technical equipment that would help him do so (the number of diodes, the number and type of video screens and so on). Then making a bit more eye contact than he'd managed all evening, Christopher happily walked us through the problem while a clock ticked down. (He had estimated having an average of four minutes to do this problem in the exam and promised he would take no more than that to repeat it.) This echoes the novel, which ends and then has an appendix in which Christopher does indeed offer his proof. (Indeed, the book is filled with various sorts of mathematical problems that Haddon engagingly illustrates throughout.)

And while Christopher bounced up and down rather excitedly (he really loves math) and the audience stood there rapt and bewildered -- their coats half on, their bags in the process of being picked up -- and he ran through the proof that was clearly over our heads, I began to tear up.

Christopher isn't a freak and his genius might indeed make him a valuable member of society. He's not just performing stunts like instantly counting toothpicks when they spill out of a container; he's a living breathing person with passions and complexities. They just don't always mesh with the passions and emotional needs of what others demand.

Some people with high functioning Asperger's can grow immensely in their social skills as they mature throughout adolescence. A person who at one point might have seemed a hopeless outcast can sometimes as an adult find their niche, their friends, their place in the world. Maybe that would happen for Christopher, maybe not. But on stage with an audience appreciating and savoring his genius and smiling and laughing with him, it seemed possible. They weren't merely observing him; they were making an effort to understand what moved

and excited him, instead of just being exasperated that he couldn't do what they wanted. It was a genuine meeting of the minds. Cue confetti.

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