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GOLDEN THEATRE

I'm not sure what I think of Edward Albee's play *A Delicate Balance* or even what I think of this particular production. All I can discuss is this particular performance, an evening filled with difficulties. This starry new production directed by Pam MacKinnon (who did [a solid job with Albee's Virginia Woolf](#)) has three acts. I and virtually everyone else in sight spent the first act infuriated and confused by the fact that someone on the other side of the theater began to snore very, very loudly the moment the play began and continued unabated throughout the 50 minutes of the first act. Star Glenn Close notably stumbled over her lines in key monologues. Audience members continually craned their necks, trying to see who it was, wondering helplessly why the people next to this slumberer didn't just shake him or her awake. What was going on? Someone opening a candy wrapper can ruin an entire scene; this was a non-stop barrage of noise that filled the theater.

The actual truth was revealed during the intermission. On the other side of the theater was a person in a wheelchair with a care-giver and various apparatus in tow. The constant noise was apparently coming from them. This was actually comforting; at least we knew audience members hadn't lost their minds in refusing to wake someone. It does raise the ethical issue of when someone should recuse themselves from theater-going. We are far beyond the era when anyone remotely "different" was told to stay out of sight, when a ramp for a wheelchair was considered an absurd accommodation rather than common decency and rightly required by law.

I was aghast recently to hear of [a "shrine" in Hanceville, Alabama founded by a Catholic nun](#) had turned away a mother and her son because the boy had a medical condition that made it impossible for him to maintain the absolute silence they requested. I'm pretty sure Jesus didn't say don't forbid the little children to come to him, unless they can't keep quiet, in which case keep them away.

One can think of many spaces where someone might feel discomfited by the presence of others and we'd rightly say, "So what?" Art museums? They're often quiet, but one is free to move around and the artwork won't be fundamentally changed by the presence of noise. A Picasso will look no different whatever you hear.

But is theater different? It requires absolute quiet from the audience in order to exist in the first place. Is it cruel to suggest if one can't be still that one will have to remove live theater from the pleasures of your life in deference to the artists at work and the audience? It would be cruel for me to see a future with no theater, but I hope if some day I proved incapable of the silence essential to the experience, that I'd do so. Movie theaters sometimes designate a screening time as one in which parents with small babies are welcome, but no such accommodation is possible in the theater where so few performances are available and the actual event itself will be thrown out of whack by noise, no matter how prepared the actors may be.

It's a delicate issue, to say the least, but hopefully one that can be raised without instant accusations of insensitivity and cruelty. My annoyance ceased the moment I understood the situation, but its negative effect on the performance remained. The noise continued for the rest of the show and others around me remained oblivious to its source and confused as to why no one did something. How dare I suggest someone be "banned"

because it might perturb me? Well, I'm not suggesting anyone be banned. I am suggesting that some events -- like live theater -- simply can't exist without absolute silence from the audience. So what did I think? I think on another night, and certainly later in the run, you may have a better evening of theater.

Here's Glenn Close talking with the New York Times.

As for this production on this night, I was underwhelmed. I've never seen *A Delicate Balance* before. Here it seemed a pale dry rehash of Albee's masterpiece *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The notes say it takes place "now" though it's clearly set in 1966 when the play premiered and the clothes and setting (and lack of cell phones) make that obvious. The set design by Santo Loquasto is quietly rich as only the oldest money or best taste can provide. And indeed most of the tech elements were superior.

It begins with the undoubted center of the family (Close as Agnes) holding forth amusingly on whether she'll ever lose her mind and if she can worry about losing her mind, surely that's an indication that she hasn't, at least not yet. Her modest, unassuming husband Tobias (John Lithgow) chimes in when needed. Close can do blue-blooded steely matriarch better than anyone and we immediately know the country club, drinks before dinner, where are the servants world we're ensconced in.

The only fly in the ointment -- at first -- is Agnes's sister Claire (Lindsay Duncan in a role famously assayed by Marian Seldes and Elaine Stritch). She's a drunken truth-teller, blurting out the ugly facts when others would prefer to glide over them in silence. But the ointment is about to receive a lot more flies. First, the daughter of Agnes and Tobias is coming home. It sounds innocent until you realize this means that the latest marriage of Julia (Martha Plimpton) has collapsed. Four! One divorce or even two might pass muster amongst well-bred people but four is an embarrassment.

Zingers are tossed, recriminations fester and it all seems like a familiar, poisonous drawing room drama. Then Harry (Bob Balaban) and Edna (Clare Higgins) pop in and the evening takes a surreal turn. They are the best friends of Agnes and Tobias, though what exactly does that mean in a world where emotions are tamped, where husbands and wives seem to always sleep in separate rooms and hearts are rarely unburdened? Nonetheless, they are unquestionably best friends and when Harry and Edna show up they are of course welcome. The two of them announce that they were home, alone and became...scared. Or perhaps terrified is a better word. They arrive, they spend the night and then they go home -- to get more clothes. Harry and Edna are here to stay. Julia is furious (they're staying in her room), Claire is amused and Agnes and Tobias wrestle over what if anything to do.

It's a fascinating left turn in what seemed a straightforward show about the festering unhappiness in the world of the privileged. (Indeed, the Jon Robin Baitz play *Other Desert Cities* I now realize owes a debt to this one.) But very little works here. Let's begin with the sound design by Scott Lehrer. When a car pulls up to the driveway of their home, it sounds more like an 18 wheeler -- presumably this is meant to add to the air of menace but it comes across as absurdly exaggerated. And such is the effect of the entire show where every emotion feels telegraphed and the subtext is always...text. Each scene ends with the actors frozen into position but because our emotions are not engaged it looks more like a diorama at a museum than a moment of life caught in amber.

Duncan seems adrift; she's got the zingers but not the desperation or menace that would give them bite. Plimpton seems to have based her entire performance around an off-hand line that says she is behaving like a silent movie star -- she's forever posing and delivering her lines with Katharine Hepburn-like brio and it doesn't work. Bob Balaban barely registers as Harry. His big scene with Tobias could have the snap of passive aggressiveness but remains merely flat on his end. Close is the most disappointing because we know how very good she can be. Perhaps her work will gel soon but for now her Agnes doesn't feel remotely like the fulcrum of the family the way she should.

Luckily, we have some pleasures to appreciate. Higgins is wonderful as Edna. She comes in weepy and

distraught over the fear that has pounced on her and Harry. But in her very next scene Edna takes charge and rarely let's go, slapping Julia, cutting through the politesse to the heart of the matter with scalpel-like efficiency. She's a joy to watch though it puts into stark relief Agnes -- Edna seems to steamroller over that presumably formidable woman. And Lithgow is very good as Tobias. His big scene isn't quite the triumph it might be because Balaban hardly registers -- Lithgow is fencing alone during Tobias's meltdown. But through sheer talent and determination, he wrings emotion and pathos and harrowing fear out of it anyway. It's a brief glimpse of the play *A Delicate Balance* might actually be.

ALLEGRO *** 1/2 out of ****

CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

Where to begin? If you told me that *Allegro* was a little-known gem that Stephen Sondheim wrote at the height of his powers, I'd believe you. It's sophisticated, modern, completely of the moment in its concerns and filled with a handful of winning melodies alongside some lovely choral work. This is both a compliment to Sondheim's greatness and an acknowledgement of the debt he owes (and readily admits) to the team of Rodgers & Hammerstein.

If you have any interest in musical theater, you won't want to miss this winning production of such a little-seen entry in the R&H catalog. One can perhaps understand why it was both too ahead of its time in 1947 and also never destined for wide popular appeal. But this isn't some scholarly effort: it's sweet and charming and bursting with talented actors. I can only hope it's captured on disc so I can listen to them perform this score again and again. It will rank among my favorites of the year.

Reportedly, the original *Allegro* involved elaborate dance sequences and a massive cast that served as Greek chorus. In typical fashion, director John Doyle has stripped it all down to 90 minutes, a mostly bare stage and an intimate cast that also plays instruments to provide the music. For such a modest, *Our Town*-like tale, it's easy to see how the original production by Agnes de Mille overwhelmed the proceedings. Here, every element feels just right.

Allegro is the story of a doctor from birth to the key moment in his life when he decides exactly what kind of doctor he wants to be -- a big administrator who spends most of his time fundraising and holding the hands of wealthy, hypochondriacal patients or a real doctor like his dad?

It begins, charmingly, at birth with Joseph Taylor Jr. (Claybourne Elder) literally crawling around on the floor experiencing life for the first time. We've already been introduced to his dad, Joseph Taylor Sr. (Malcolm Gets) and his mom Marjorie (Jessica Tyler Wright). They are perfectly in sync with life and work. Joseph has dreams of opening a little hospital to better serve their little town but it's not a dream of ambition so much as a dream of practicality. They simply need a hospital since winter weather and long distances between homes can make it almost impossible for a doctor to place house calls or help a woman in labor. Marjorie needs no help and their son is soon growing by leaps and bounds, a born doctor as both of his parents can see.

We see Joe take his first steps, gaze at wonder at the world, study hard at school and fall hard for Jenny Brinker (Elizabeth A. Davis), the daughter of a rich and powerful businessman. In the show's most electrifying moment of drama, Jenny and Marjorie face off, declaring their opposition to one another. Jenny insists Marjorie never liked her. Marjorie tries to get Jenny to see that the ambitions she has for Joe -- dump medicine for business or at least become a "big time" doctor in Chicago -- will never make Joe happy. Before it can come to a head, Marjorie has died and Jenny and Joe get married. Propelled by the Great Depression, they move to the Windy City and Joe proves marvelously adept at wooing and winning over the powerful administrators and donors of a major hospital. His essential decency shines through even as Joe grows more and more unhappy with the "work" he's doing, work that seems far removed from actual doctoring.

The tale positively zips along and the themes of the show -- medicine becoming big business, a quick pill or

injection versus paying attention to the patient's entire history and keeping their needs first and foremost -- are rather surprising for a show from just after World War II. In *Allegro*, Joe is dealing with a wife pushing him to be more ambitious. Today, he'd probably be wrestling with overwhelming student loan debt. But the end result would be the same: a talented person who might excel at general practice is forced into more lucrative specialties like cosmetic surgery or administrative positions. With marital infidelity, a wife that grows increasingly shrewish, and a jaundiced attitude towards relationships (Joe's best friend much prefers to play the field), it's yet another example of how foolish people used to be when they dismissed Rodgers & Hammerstein as merely saccharine and wholesome.

Doyle's instinct to strip a show down and keep it as theatrical, as simple as possible, again pays huge dividends. The cast as Greek chorus urging Joe along surely works better when they have the warm embrace of a small town rather than an intimidating size of a big city in their numbers. And as always actors can reveal character in the way they play their instruments -- such as George Abud's winning playfulness when he plucks a string.

And what a strong cast: Gets brings innate charm to the small but cornerstone role of Joe Sr. You just know he's a good man. And Wright is wonderful as his wife. But everyone is: Alma Cuervo is terrific in multiple roles, especially Joe's grandmother. Davis keeps Jenny from becoming a caricature without softening the coldness that creeps into her heart. Ed Romanoff is also good as Jenny's father, a man who is broken by the economic collapse. Abud is really delightful as Charlie, an everyman counterpoint to Joe's almost too-good morality and sings with period specificity. Jane Pfitsch has the gift of singing the show's most famous number since she plays Emily, Joe's secretary at the hospital. But she makes the most of "The Gentleman Is A Dope" and you've little doubt that she'll be following Joe back home when his marriage collapses, though the show is too savvy to tie up every loose end.

At the heart of it all is Claybourne Elder. He has an innate, Gary Cooper-like decency that makes this tall glass of water instantly appealing. He anchors the show and makes the climax where Joe must decide whether to accept a big new appointment truly suspenseful. But there's something wrong with a musical that climaxes in a speech. And indeed, Elder needs all his charm to keep Joe the center of attention since in this version he has no big breakout number and is really the focus of attention while everyone around him is singing. He handles the task ably but having a protagonist who doesn't get to belt out a big number three or four times may be one reason *Allegro* may not still connect as easily as it might.

But it's truly a group effort and that sense of community, that sense of pull back home is what drives the show emotionally. It's not the pull of a simpler, easier time. Life in the big city is far more lucrative and easier than life as a small town doctor. It's just not as satisfying. The songs and the ensemble propel the story ahead. "One Foot, Other Foot" is a real delight wisely reprised at the finale, but it's joined by the scene-setting "Joseph Taylor Jr.," Charlie's "It May Be A Good Idea For Joe" and "The Gentleman Is A Dope" among the stand-outs. Yet what I remember best is the sense of story as the chorus weighed in; when they urge Joe to "come home" as he makes his fateful choice, it was genuinely moving.

Is anyone dumb enough to still pretend Sondheim doesn't write songs you can hum when you leave the theater? Of course not; he has too many standards to his credit. And probably no one can pretend Rodgers & Hammerstein were a formidable duo whose work was far more penetrating and ambitious in both song and story than they were given credit for. Success can make people think a brilliant step forward in musical theater like *Oklahoma* was in retrospect just wholesome hokum, forgetting the rapacious image of Curly. They can forget the wife-beater of *Carousel*, the racism at the heart of *South Pacific* (the racism of our sweet heroine, no less), the clashing of cultures in *The King & I*, the story of assimilation however baldly delivered in *The Flower Drum Song* and, well, yes *The Sound Of Music* is basically wholesome and sweet, but what a great score!

It's almost bizarre to think a team so successful could see *Cinderella* take more than 50 years to jump from TV to Broadway or *Allegro* almost disappear from view. I hope somehow a recording becomes available, I'd love to

see this again and can only imagine it will inspire more productions in the years to come.

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