

THE BLOG 02/26/2016 02:06 am ET | Updated Feb 25, 2017

# Theater: Oscar Winner Forest Whitaker Dives Into "Hughie;" Trevor Nunn Drowns In "Pericles"



By Michael Giltz

**HUGHIE** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**PERICLES** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**HUGHIE** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**BOOTH THEATRE**

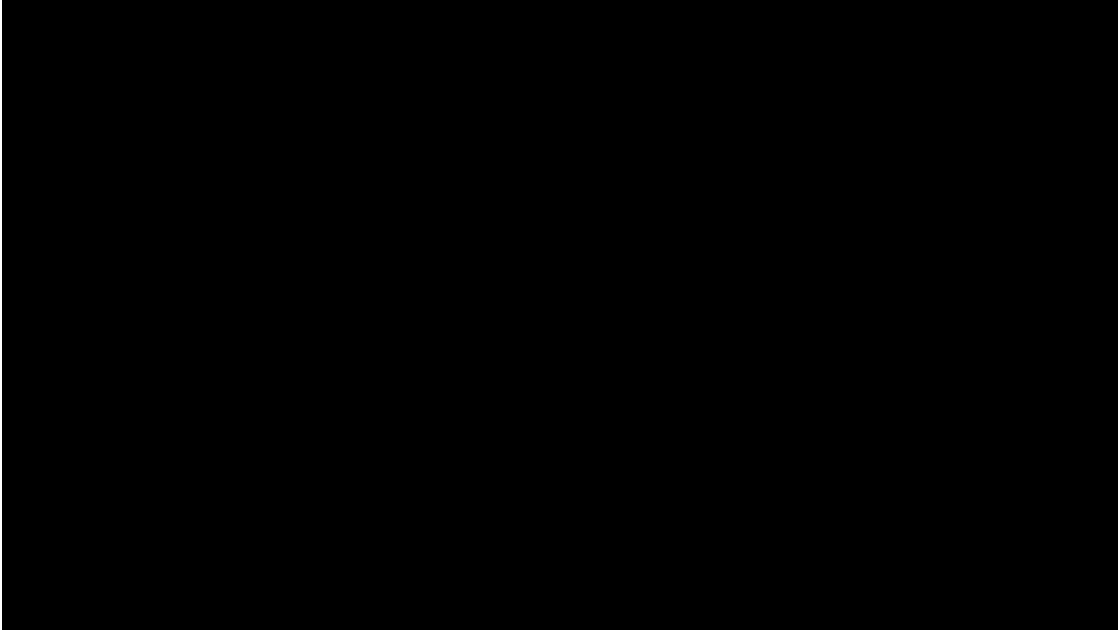
The great film actor Forest Whitaker dives into the deep end of the pool with his Broadway debut. Not only does he tackle the work of Eugene O'Neill, but he tackles *Hughie*, essentially a monologue O'Neill himself described as more for reading than performing. It has bedeviled actors like Al Pacino, though Jason Robards made the most of it for TV during an episode of *American Playhouse*.

It is to Whitaker's great credit, frankly, that he doesn't fall flat on his face. Indeed, just navigating the boards in a light comedy can be a challenge for first-timers. Instead, he projects clearly (no small feat) and is comfortable on stage. He hasn't come close (yet) to conquering the tricky text; many actors never do, in this case. But he has presence. In certain quiet moments, a nervous glance or slump of the shoulders prove magnetic, hinting at the strong stage actor Whitaker might well become if he devotes more time to the theater. Surely he's conquered any jitters after braving a play like this. Hopefully, he'll return.

No returns are likely in store for Whitaker's character, the two-bit gambler Erie. A sad sack fellow, he enters the lobby of a faded New York City hotel in 1928 (right before the Crash), nervously looking back over his shoulder. The late night clerk (Tony winner Frank Wood) seems more interested in getting back to his newspaper but Erie bends his ear with stories of Hughie, the last clerk whose funeral has prompted a days-long binge by our protagonist. Hughie, he insists loudly and often, was a sucker, but Erie liked him. The clerk barely responds; at times, I wondered if Erie was trapped in some limbo, a nether region of frustrated expectations and broken dreams.

He is but there's nothing supernatural about it. Erie is all too human, bending his large frame into a bench in the corner of the lobby, almost disappearing into his own loneliness before desperately launching into another anecdote. The stories tumble out: how Hughie never really gambled, though once he tried; how Hughie's wife didn't trust Erie; how Erie's luck turned when Hughie got sick and what a sucker Hughie was but boy did Erie miss him, not that they were friends. By the end of this barely one hour of holding forth and trying to hold back the night, Erie triggers something in the clerk, who finally starts bantering with or at least humoring the guy.

They begin to roll the dice, just for fun and perhaps for a few minutes Erie can pretend his luck will soon turn again and this time for good.



It's a slight piece and indeed O'Neill is right about the reading: huge chunks of the written play include the unspoken inner monologue of the clerk. Typically, *Hughie* is played with our broken down gambler sinking further and further into despair. This time, it seems as if he's actually able to kid himself into the illusion of good times being just around the corner, at least presumably until Erie reluctantly heads to his empty room.

For his first Broadway show (and apparently first theater of any sort since college), Whitaker certainly receives a first class showcase. The director is Michael Grandage and the marvelous technical team has given him a jewel of a production. The set and costume design of Christopher Oram is marvelously atmospheric, with the hotel lobby featuring deep shadows, faded grandeur and a sweeping staircase headed up into nothingness. (The ceiling hovering over them is cracked and raw on the edge facing the audience, with only a neon sign and inky blackness above.) Oram's costumes are also spot-on, with Whitaker clothed in faded threads that surely once held some pizzazz. The lighting design of Neil Austin is impeccable. But above all the marvelous score and sound design of Adam Cork sets the scene perfectly, creating the ambience of the city with audio touches and excellent music worthy of a great noir.

Whitaker's co-star is the impeccable Frank Wood, who has the impossible task of listening/not listening, of being both a real human being and a black hole of indifference. Somehow, he pulls it off, giving the back and forth to a fellow actor without betraying the text. And Whitaker is pretty good, high praise indeed for a role that can prove a swamp. We are never lost in his telling, though the potential magic of the tale and Erie's sad despair never quite comes out, not really. Some film actors don't translate to the stage; they need the close-up of the camera. Not Whitaker. Here's hoping he returns in one of those juicy parts courtesy of August Wilson, preferably after touring with it for a while to let the role sink into his bones. *Hughie* is no triumph but

it's the start of what could be a promising stage career.

**PERICLES** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

## **THEATRE FOR A NEW AUDIENCE AT THE POLONSKY SHAKESPEARE CENTER**

Excited to see my first production of *Pericles*, I did what I usually do with a classic text: I read it. I prefer to see a modern play for the first time (even a revival) without reading it. But for Restoration Comedy and Greek tragedy and the like, it's wiser to read the play so one spends less time worried about what exactly they're saying and more time appreciating the performances. To read *Pericles* is to understand why some dispute the idea that Shakespeare wrote ANY of it: it's no good, not really, so how *could* it be by the Bard, they seem to say.

Characters behave without motivation, events marvelous and absurd tumble on top of one another and there are an awful lot of storms at sea. Still, it could be fun and apparently has been rehabilitated in recent years, to a degree. Some scenes pop out with potential: it seems likely Shakespeare contributed to it, especially the later portions of the play which include a promising battle of wills in a brothel and a touching moment of family members reuniting.

Now I've seen the great director Trevor Nunn's take on *Pericles*. He certainly makes no case here for the show's potential and indeed this production in particular gets worse as it goes along. However, it is done to a fault (though some lines were cut, I couldn't tell where and the very lengthy tale is essentially intact) and I certainly enjoyed getting *Pericles* under my belt as much as Nunn did in directing it. (He's done virtually all with one more title to go in the canon, or should I say the Folio.) With such a large cast, it's no surprise at least some would deliver the goods. Besides, can one mess up a bad play? Nunn comes awfully close.

First the story. (Fasten your seat belts.) Pericles (Christian Camargo, a welcome anchor to this nonsense) is a handsome prince in want of a bride. He hears of a famed beauty available for the asking. But there's a catch. Suitors must solve the riddle posed by her father, a king. If they succeed, she's theirs; if they fail, they die. Pericles solves the puzzle with ease. But it's a trick! The solution to the Sphinx-like conundrum is that the King is sharing the marital bed of his own daughter. Solve it and he'll kill you for knowing his shame. Fail to solve it and you die anyway. Pericles somehow escapes.

He returns home but realizes this king must track him down and kill him. Our hero knows the king's monstrous secret and can't be allowed to live. How can Pericles put his own kingdom through the horrors of war? So he installs a regent and slips away for foreign parts. First Pericles stops off in a kingdom suffering from famine. He hands out grain to save the day (why not?) and having done his good deed for the day takes off again.

The first of many storms strikes him and Pericles is washed up on the shore of another kingdom, rescued by kindly fishermen and donned in his own rusty armor just in time to win a tournament *and* the heart of that kingdom's fair princess. They marry and decide to return home, only to be set upon by another pesky storm at sea, with the pregnant princess giving birth and then dying. She's sent overboard in a sealed coffin while Pericles barely survives a shipwreck with his child, inexplicably dropping the kid off at the kingdom he saved from famine rather than his own country and then heading off to parts unknown.

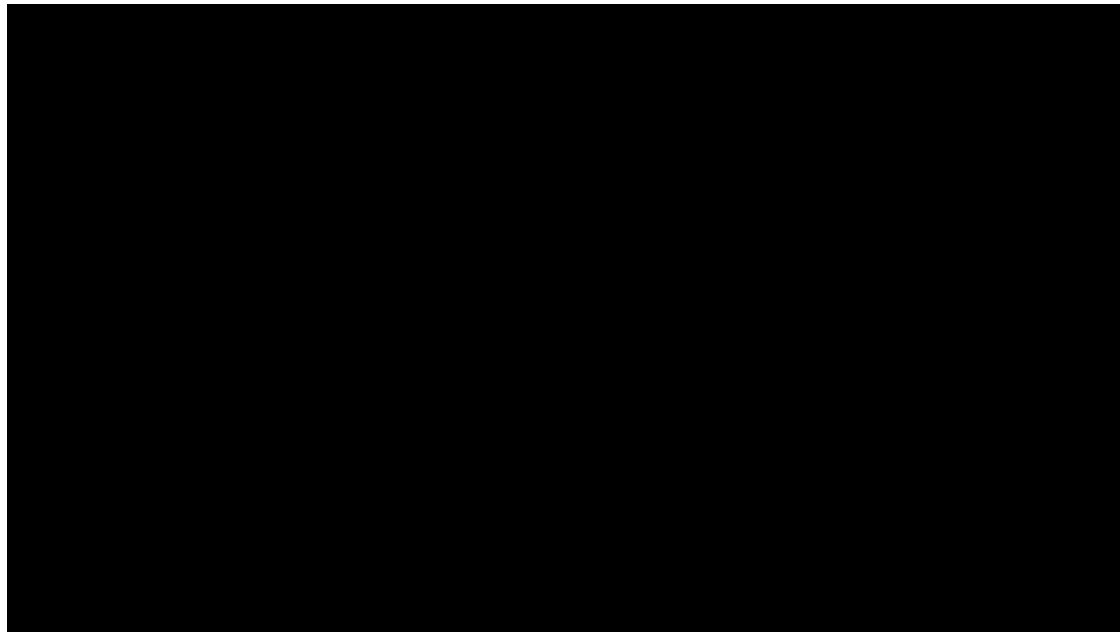
But wait! His queen is NOT dead and her sealed casket is retrieved. (Seemingly every scene takes place in a new country.) She is revived, assumes her husband and child are dead and dashes off to serve as a servant at

the temple of Diana, refusing to reveal her name or the fact that she's the queen of a kingdom or send word to either her family or her future home about the fate of her husband and their king. Why? Why not?

Pericles wanders the earth while his daughter grows up to be the most beautiful girl around and best friends with the daughter of the governor sheltering her. Unintentionally, she outshines said girl, infuriating the governor's wife who despairs of marrying off her daughter while this paragon of grace and beauty is present. Naturally, instead of shipping her back to her father or the kingdom she is now princess of, the wife plans to have her killed. An assassin draws his blade on the innocent teenage girl and.... But wait! Pirates pop up out of nowhere and bundle her off to a brothel in yet another kingdom. Pericles shows up two minutes later, only to be told his daughter is dead.

Not true! So saintly and good is this girl she talks every customer out of debauchery and sends them on their way, contrite and angry at the madame of this house of ill repute. Furious, she bundles the girl off to be a tutor where the princess soon wins the heart of the town's chief noble. He hears of a mute, miserable man who will speak to no one whatsoever, a traveler who wanders in despair having lost both his wife and daughter to the fates.

The girl assures this mute man her tale of woe can outdo his and finally he entreats her to tell it. She does and they tremblingly realize that father and daughter have been reunited. Before they can return to wreck havoc on the traitorous king and queen, the goddess Diana tells Pericles to offer thanks at her temple. He does so and both father and daughter are reunited with her mother. Since we are told both the incestuous king, his illicit daughter/lover, the traitorous governor's wife and her husband have all met murderous ends, we can smile and heave a sigh of joy at the happy ending.



Well, really, one can hardly reduce this epic the way one might sum up *Hamlet* (prince of Denmark believes his

late father was murdered, uncovers the truth and everyone dies) or *Romeo & Juliet* (two young lovers of warring families plan to run off together but their plan goes awry and they each commit suicide over love for the other). *Pericles* is stuff and nonsense. Still, it might have a certain energy and there are scenes and lines worth doing. But it's as if Nunn were adapting *The Scarlet Pimpernel* but treating it like *Macbeth*. You don't necessarily want to make fun of the whole affair (though a Monty Python approach has its appeal), but you certainly don't want to treat it as the stately epic Nunn clearly envisioned.

Nonetheless, more than a few cast members make their mark. Camargo is a strong central presence, adding gravitas and rather unexpectedly gaining dignity in the late scenes where he must sport a beard worthy of Methuselah and the dramatics drag out. Will Swenson as the governor of that region beset by famine and Nina Hellman as his scheming wife both make a very strong impression.

As Simonides, the goodly king whose daughter is wooed and won by Pericles, John Rothman strikes exactly the right tone for what Nunn might have done: enjoyed the nonsense at hand while delivering it with verve and conviction. Rothman has a twinkle in his eye when tricking Pericles and the king's daughter to declare their love by making them think he is opposed. He wins the audience over with his almost panto-like glee at fooling them. It's the same tone often embraced by the show's narrator, embodied by Raphael Nash Thompson with dignified grace and his own twinkle.

The favorable impressions multiply. Patrice Johnson Chevannes is good, especially when sinking her teeth into the madame of the brothel who is frustrated by the chaste nature of her latest whore. Zachary Infante has a puckish presence in three roles, especially a fisherman. Similarly, Ian Lassiter is good in multiple parts, especially as the official who is won over by the daughter of Pericles and her wholesome nature. John Keating, as always, is exceptional in every role, here adding menace to the servant in that brothel and especially as a kindly fisherman.

What's this? How can one list a half dozen people who make a good impression but think so little of the play? Unfortunately, after rightly bringing on board Camargo, director Nunn has cast the other two leads with actresses not remotely up to the task at hand. Gia Crovatin is lovely in appearance as the woman Pericles will wed and Lilly Englert equally lovely in appearance as their daughter. They do indeed look strikingly similar and perhaps too much emphasis was placed on that rather than acting. Neither is remotely comfortable with this text in particular or Shakespearean performance in general and it's a pity since they are central to the play's most notable scenes. Englert's breathing was notably labored and indeed worrying (I'm not kidding) and her voice brought to mind Kay Francis. Crovatin simply felt wooden. Neither was done any favors by being handed such key roles. Perhaps they shine in contemporary roles, but not here.

Even if those two roles were recast, this *Pericles* would not work. Nunn has shown far too much respect to a work that at best might be amiable. The play slows and slows until by the end it seems to be directed by Cecil B. DeMille. The actors are lined up as in a tableaux while their final words are declaimed at a ponderous crawl just when we'd prefer they gallop to the finish.

The scenic design is good, with Robert Jones creating some fine effects centering around a full moon that looms over the stage and opens and closes to reveal stormy seas, goddesses and the like. But the costumes of Constance Hoffman are disastrous, unintentionally silly when they're not simply unflattering and distracting from start to finish. While Camargo almost alone is given decent threads at the start, by the end he looks like Moses circa Charlton Heston, sporting sackcloth and a scraggly grey beard more fitting for a comic sketch.

The music is a mess, as well. The score and songs are by Shaun Davey. Much to my delight, the members of PigPen Theatre, one of the most innovative and charming troupes around was brought on board. I was confused when I realized they weren't actually writing the score. It's even more confusing to see them in the show since Nunn seems to have no idea what to do with them. They do yeoman's work in various small acting roles (though, at one point, two members are costumed in what look like sheets with curtains sewn on top of them in some crazy drunken spree of mad tailoring). But they only occasionally sport their instruments and are hardly used to advantage, with the melodies underscoring the narration rarely making an impression. By the end, Nunn seems to have lost interest in them and the final, bad music -- underlining every emotion in italics -- is played by musicians situated in the second level rafters. Indeed, the concept for the music is a confused idea that peters out to nothing -- a real shame since it's like asking Wilco to be your house band and then shunting them aside.

At the end, the narrator gains unwelcome laughter when reassuring us the show is almost over. In a drawn out goodbye, he saunters up a platform and waves goodbye, with the cast turning to wave him bon voyage and then turning back to wave goodbye to us again, yet another stately, dragged out moment in a show that savors them, from the unnecessary writhing of famine victims to the parade of combatants at a tournament to the curtain call that they extend just a little past our breaking point.

## **THEATER OF 2016**

*Employee Of The Year* (Under The Radar at Public) \*\*\*  
*Germinal* (Under The Radar At Public) \*\*\* 1/2  
*Fiddler On The Roof* 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein \*\* 1/2  
*Skeleton Crew* \*\*\*  
*Noises Off* (2016 Broadway revival) \*\* but \*\*\* if you've never seen it before  
*The Grand Paradise* \*\*\*  
*Our Mother's Brief Affair* \* 1/2  
*Something Rotten* \*\*\*  
*Sense & Sensibility* (Bedlam revival) \*\*\* 1/2  
*Broadway & The Bard* \* 1/2  
*Prodigal Son* \*\*  
*A Bronx Tale: The Musical* \*\*  
*Buried Child* (2016 revival w Ed Harris) \*\*  
*Nice Fish* \*\*\*  
*Broadway By The Year: The 1930s* at Town Hall \*\*\*  
*Hughie* \*\*  
*Pericles* (w Christian Camargo) \* 1/2

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