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Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

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05/06/2017 02:03 am ET | Updated May 06, 2017

TWELFTH NIGHT ** 1/2 out of ****

SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION ** out of ****

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PUBLIC THEATER

For sixty years, the Public Theater has been bringing free performances of Shakespeare to the people. Everyone knows about Shakespeare in the Park. But since the 1950s, the Public has also been mounting Shakespeare in all five boroughs, heading to schools and prisons and hospitals and pretty much anywhere they can mark off a little space, draw a crowd and begin to declaim. The Mobile Unit celebrates the finale of its latest NYC tour by offering free performances at the Public itself as a sort of capper. The main columns of the LuEsther Theater are stamped with the names of more than a dozen locations where this take on the romance *Twelfth Night* has appeared.

By nature, Mobile Unit often boasts compact takes on the plays — here they have a trim, 90 minute spin on the gender-bending comedy, complete with rappers, cavorting in the audience and a festive vibe. One can reshape a play by Shakespeare to distill its essence or emphasize an unexpected side or simply — as in this case — to keep the party going. The setting might be the islands or the Illyria of the original, but given the casual combination of Spanish and English as well as several scenes in a swimming pool, I'm going to imagine it's set in the sunny South Florida of my youth.

Two identical twins are shipwrecked in a strange land, prompting director Saheem Ali to hang his show on the understanding that Viola and Sebastian are refugees. Sebastian avoids the police, Viola takes a job in a household under an assumed name and gender (she dresses as a boy for safety) and they both fear the other is dead. Romance ensues, with Viola falling for her new boss Orsino, who himself is in love with the haughty and grieving Olivia...who promptly falls for the boy Viola is pretending to be when our heroine courts the woman in her new master's name. In a silly subplot typical of Shakespeare, some drunken ne'er do wells play pranks on Olivia's stuffy servant Malvolio.



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A scene from “*Twelfth Night*” presented by the Public Theater’s Mobile Unit.

Confused? Not to worry. Subtlety is naturally lost in all the hijinks, but the high spirits come across loud and clear.

The staging is simple, but that’s not a constraint of Mobile Unit so much as a blessing. I sometimes think plays should be forced to justify every single prop brought onstage. Employing just a blue sheet with a hole in the middle, the play begins and we immediately understand some people are at sea, a storm is raging, the waters are rising (as the sheet billows and is lifted above our actors) and in the blink of an eye two of them are deposited on land, lost and confused and lucky to be alive. Who needs anything more than a few props and an active imagination? (The scenic design is by Arnulfo Maldonado and the costumes by Dede Ayite.)

You won’t find many plays by Shakespeare that aren’t rich with meaning and many layers. But we’ve recently had especially thoughtful takes on *Twelfth Night*, first with Mark Rylance on Broadway and then Bedlam’s multiple versions done in repertory. Here, little new is unearthed and certain elements are obscured but it’s an enjoyable romp with a game cast.

I wasn’t thrilled with Ceci Fernandez’s campy take on Olivia but she grew on me. And if I’d only seen Michael Bradley Cohen as Orsino, I would have thought him stiff and seemingly uncomfortable with the language of Shakespeare — he made it sound artificial and awkward almost all the way through. Presumably that was a choice (an odd one, but a choice nonetheless) since he practically steals the show as the thick-headed Sir

Andrew. As dull as Cohen was in romantic mode, he was twice as fun as the live-wire Sir Andrew, palling around with Sir Toby Belch (an equally fun Christopher Ryan Grant) and in general having a grand old time. (And I speak as one who typically finds the antics of the clowns in Shakespeare an awful bore.) Here they are practically the main event and I didn't mind in the least. Cohen may have the dash of a leading man but he's a nutball at heart.

In this version, Sebastian mostly disappears from view, so actor Sebastian Chacon had little opportunity to make an impression. Danaya Esperanza as Viola, on the other hand, acquitted herself nicely, as did Donnetta Lavinia Grays. The scene with Grays as a cop was priceless (she nailed the speech pattern to perfection) and the moment when her character Feste realizes Viola is a girl disguised as a boy was especially fun. As Malvolio, David Ryan Smith (apparently yet another cast member to benefit from a quota demanding actors with three names) gave purpose and pleasure to a role often reduced to mockery. Sure he pranced around with priggish disapproval, to a degree that one might question how he could ever fall for a ruse claiming Olivia was in love with him (or give a fig if she were). But since the show had a distinct multi-sexual vibe, who am I to question the heart of Malvolio?

I do question the cutting of director Ali. If I were to take a knife to *Twelfth Night*, the very *first* thing I would cut is the cruel, unpleasant treatment of Malvolio when he is practically tortured in a manner way out of whack to his offense. It makes us turn against the clowns and poisons the otherwise trouble-free, Austen-like finale. Let him be the butt of jokes (yellow socks should be the end of it), cut to a last scene where he can grumpily promise "revenge" on a prank that was no more than prankish and then we could all smile.

But that surely is the fun of Mobile Unit for the creatives: delivering Shakespeare to those who rarely if ever see it, giving younger actors a chance to sink their teeth into these great roles and getting to put your own stamp on one of his plays. Next time, I'll bring the scissors.

SIX DEGREES OF SEPARATION ** out of ****

ETHEL BARRYMORE THEATRE

Playwright John Guare is not having a good time of it. Since conquering the world with his zeitgeist of a play *Six Degrees of Separation* in 1990, Guare has stumbled. *Four Baboons Adoring The Sun* came and went, the musical *Sweet Smell Of Success* was lauded mostly for the lead performance of John Lithgow and the ambitious drama *A Free Man Of Color* could not equal its reach.

That's not so unusual. Artists often have peak years (roughly a decade) and then spend the rest of their careers working over the same ideas to lesser effect. But now Guare's earlier work is coming in for reappraisal. His breakthrough musical *Two Gentlemen Of Verona* came to Shakespeare In The Park and was found lacking by some. One could blame the woefully misguided revival of *The House Of Blue Leaves* on the bad casting of Ben Stiller, but he wasn't the problem, really.

Now here's the one unquestionable success of his career mounted with mostly good casting. Allison Janney in the role made famous by Stockard Channing is seemingly a slam dunk and John Benjamin Hickey makes perfect sense as her husband. Only Corey Hawkins of *24* and *Straight Outta Compton* as Paul — the supposed son of Sidney Poitier — was a gamble and he just snagged the show's only acting nomination at the Tonys.

Yet a play I was eager to see on stage for the first time (I hated the film) proves awkward and noisy and...obvious when it's not confused. Once reportedly pivoting around the formidable Ouisa (Janney), as directed by Trip Cullman it now seems to be about the children of privilege as much as their parents. One struggles to drum up interest in any of them. My friends who saw the electric original staging insist it was revelatory. They can concede the production may have outshone the play and that the story perhaps was very much of its time. But were they conned? No, they won't hear of it.

On the evidence here, however, impartial observers are disheartened to say perhaps they were. Is there a victim in this, other than Guare? Certainly not. Just as Paul was invited into the homes of these wealthy New Yorkers, the original *Six Degrees* charmed and flattered in that first engagement. If its act of name-dropping, barbed wit (those easy jokes about the musical *Cats*) and Reagan-era dazzle fails to pull the wool over our eyes more than 25 years later, well, the same con rarely works twice.

The show features a cast of 18 (!) but it's three people you really remember. Hickey plays Flan, a private art dealer who lives an upscale life in New York City but is always walking a financial tightrope. When the play begins in 1990, he desperately needs a wealthy friend to invest in a painting Flan wants to acquire. His wife

Ouisa know the game and is ready to charm and ingratiate with the best of them. Their kids are in the Ivy League and their home is right across from Central Park but they're not *wealthy* wealthy. Ouisa knows it and is ready to put on the role of gracious hostess to support her husband's gambles.

These plans are waylaid by the startling arrival of a handsome young man who has been stabbed in Central Park. Half-carried in by their doorman, Paul is deeply apologetic while he bleeds on their carpet. Paul seems to be a good friend of their children and knows so many intimate details of their lives that any wariness of Flan and Ouisa melts away. Besides, Paul isn't *that* hurt and he's so damn charming and funny and ingratiating.

Before you know it, they've canceled their dinner plans and Paul has whipped something up in the kitchen, regaling the couple and their wealthy friend with the sheepish admission that he's the son of actor Sidney Poitier. Between holding forth on his dissertation about *The Catcher In The Rye* and casually dangling the possibility of playing extras in his father's new film, Paul has wooed and won them. They wouldn't think of having Paul wander the streets until his famous father arrives, insisting he sleep in their daughter's bedroom and take some "walking around" money to boot. It's only when they're woken by Paul having his way with a male hustler that Ouisa and Flan realize with a start that all is not as it seems.

They think they've experienced a marvelous anecdote...until their best friends turn out to have been duped by the same con man and an amusing story becomes a case of naive foolishness. They want to track Paul down and see him punished, though calls to the police leave them struggling to explain exactly what they'd like to see him punished for. (Charm? Being handy in a kitchen?)

Only their children prove capable of finding out how Paul found his way into their privileged world. Ouisa talks with Paul on the phone a few times and suddenly this slick number is revealed to be a needy, emotionally desperate figure; Ouisa is drawn to him despite herself. Can she rescue Paul? Does he need rescuing? Or does she simply need a sense of purpose lacking in her life since their notably ungrateful children have mostly flown the coop?

The marvelous Janney seems perfect to take on the role of Ouisa but it still seems haunted a bit by Channing's bravura turn the first time around. Perhaps Hickey comes across best as Flan (a good name, that), though it's hard to know where the heart of the story might be and I doubt it's him. The kids certainly dominate in my mind. The college age children pour onto the stage in a grumbling, bitter rage, positively spilling onto the vague and unsatisfying sets of Mark Wendland. Their tone is one-note and unrelenting — disdain for their parents. (To be fair, Cody Kostro nails his one sustained bit of dialogue with hilarious aplomb, adding some specificity and zip to the otherwise monotonous tone the kids are asked to maintain.)

Is it Paul we should care about? Will Smith was woefully miscast in the film since Paul is catholic in his desire to seduce and Smith proved deeply uncomfortable even *talking* about having sex with a guy. Hawkins is less constrained, but his handsome looks can't disguise the fact that here he doesn't come across as a sexual magnet. When Paul briefly eyes Ouisa like a piece of beef after her husband leaves the room, I found it more silly than sultry and half expected her to giggle kindly at his come-on. Paul's domination of a gay friend of their

kids seemed all about power, not pleasure. And when Paul seduces a street musician, I didn't buy either one of them as being slightly interested in the other.

So that leaves Paul's intellectual appeal and here too Hawkins (or the text of Guare) hit the wrong notes. To me, Paul didn't dazzle with his intellectual name-dropping or take on J.D. Salinger. He sounded precisely like a college student who has read a few books and thinks he's the first in the world to think these thoughts or hear of philosophers like Nietzsche. I wasn't blinded by Paul's monologues; they sounded earnest and over-eager and the sort of attention-needing grandstanding that marks him as precisely what he is: a kid begging for approval.

Maybe that's how Hawkins intended it to sound; but then we're left wondering why the adults respond the way they do. That take on Paul combined poorly with the lack of sexual heat throughout the show. (It was news to me when Ouisa insisted her husband was sexually attracted to Paul as well.) I never for a moment believed Ouisa could believe she had a genuine connection to Paul or even *needed* to believe it as more than a pet project of hers. Without that emotional pull, the heart of the show stops beating and we're left wondering where our focus should be. Ouisa? Paul? Flan? The lack of smart phones? Yes, the innocent nature of the characters is easy to tease in those pre-internet days. Were we really so easily duped back in 1990? No, not really. It's not technology that has dated *Six Degrees Of Separation*. It's time.

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 w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) ***

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

Bandstand ** 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) ***

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) **

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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.