

Theater: Rufus and Robert Tackle Will; 'When January Feels Like Summer'

Theater: Rufus and Robert Tackle Will; 'When January Feels Like Summer'

SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS *** out of ****

WHEN JANUARY FEELS LIKE SUMMER ** 1/2 out of ****

SHAKESPEARE'S SONNETS *** out of ****

BAM

What to do when reviewing theater? Do you scribble notes throughout about this bit of scenic design, that line of dialogue, a lighting cue? Or, like me, do you simply watch and experience the piece, assuming that if you can't remember some particular detail, so be it? That is fairest to the work, I think, but it makes it awfully hard to discuss in detail a show like Shakespeare's Sonnets. Director Robert Wilson has collaborated with artist Rufus Wainwright and the Berliner Ensemble on presenting a selection of Shakespeare's classic works of poetry. Wilson has developed visual settings, Wainwright the music and the troupe of actors performs them.

Each sonnet is typically given its own presentation: sometimes the poem is declaimed and then sung in snatches and then declaimed in part again, with the music framing or underscoring the mood. Other times the poem is sung in part (with the odd work squawked out by an actor) and then certain lines repeated as text at the end to emphasize an emotion or idea. Still others are turned into duets or voiced by three or more, interrupted by spoken passages and then taken up again. In short, without a video to rewind, I can't for the life of me give a detailed description of the evening.

If you are a fan of Wilson, you will be in familiar territory. If you are a fan of Wainwright, understand his voice is heard briefly and sometimes excellent music in varied styles pulses throughout but you'll get few easy pop moments here. If you are a fan of Berliner Ensemble, surely any rare chance to see them in the US is welcome.

Is there a story? No, but there is a mood of melancholy and regret and humor and the absurdity of it all. Again and again the helpless joy and misery of love is brought to life in Shakespeare's lines, often lifted up in song. Wilson needs a big stage but perhaps a grungy cabaret is the ideal setting for this piece. The black humor would come to the forefront and the formal air more quickly dispersed. But not many clubs could accommodate the wreck of a car stabbed onto the trunk of a tree like a memo on a spindle. Not many cabarets would allow a rather large Cupid to fly across the stage while sending an arrow straight towards the heart of Queen Elizabeth, albeit in Wilsonian slow motion.

Here's a glimpse.

At first, the show seemed a series of set pieces. One could perhaps string together the sonnets about the Dark Lady or those directed to a beautiful young man and tell an emotional story of sorts. This show takes 27 sonnets to encircle the idea of love. Inevitably, one began ticking them off: I liked what they did with this one, can't be bothered with that one and so on. The revue-like nature was emphasized by Georgette Dee, who strode along the lip of the stage during scene changes to mutter and moan and rave about love. Somehow, though her text might easily have played as camp, Dee underplayed its over-the-top nature and won me over.

But as Act Two began, the momentum picked up and the show took on a cohesive whole. It helped that the work seemed to progress from more spoken passages and individual solos to more and more singing and more group efforts, culminating in a genuinely moving presentation of Sonnet 129 and the final coda of Sonnet 66, where the speaker is tired of life and would gladly accept death if it didn't mean leaving their love alone.

The work never achieved the focus and greatness of Wilson's best work but had hypnotic passages of beauty nonetheless. Wainwright's music was thrillingly malleable and would surely benefit from repeated listens. The costumes by Jacques Reynaud were exquisite and the ensemble typically strong. Stand-outs unquestionably included Dee, Angela Schmid as Shakespeare, Angela Winkler as the Fool and an imperious Jürgen Holtz as both Elizabeth I and II. It was generally a playful evening (Wilson even did a spin before taking his bow) yet the ache of the sad moments of music and the strange power of Wilson's most striking images that linger.

Here's a sonnet from a mounting of this piece years ago that gives you an idea of the visual style of the work.

And here's Ralph Fiennes reading Sonnet 129, the penultimate piece of the evening.

WHEN JANUARY FEELS LIKE SUMMER ** 1/2 out of **** **ENSEMBLE STUDIO THEATRE**

The Ensemble Studio Theatre and [Women's Project Theater](#) have come together to present *When January Feels Like Summer*, a new play by Cori Thomas and directed by Daniella Topol that was first seen here in the spring and received strong reviews. Thomas is indeed a promising talent and her work presented with care by Topol and an excellent cast. Though the play was also mounted in Pennsylvania, one hopes Topol isn't done working on it.

It begins on a subway train, where we later realize most of the main characters cross paths. They return to the subway at the finale, where stepping into a car symbolizes a hopeful future. Typically, this idea isn't developed enough: why do their paths cross? We get no glimpse of what these characters might mean to each other in the future. And if the subway is going to be so totemic at the finale, shouldn't it appear throughout the play?

In any case, the action soon centers on two siblings, immigrants from India who manage a bodega. One is Nirmala (Mahira Kakkar), the wife of a man who has been in a coma for years, brain dead and kept alive only by machines though she's unable to pull the plug. Perhaps she feels so guilty about doing so because that husband has meant so little to her over the years. Her brother Ishan (Debargo Sanyal) certainly doesn't believe in just waiting for things to happen. He unveils his true nature to Nirmala by becoming Indira. Gender reassignment surgery is very expensive and years of hormone therapy away, but Ishan/Indira is ready to get the ball rolling by dressing as a woman and taking her first steps toward claiming her identity and presenting it to the world.

Circling them is the shy sanitation worker Joe (Dion Graham), who has a crush on Nirmala. And the comic relief comes from two young men Jeron (Carter Redwood) and Devaun (Maurice Williams). They goof around talking about women on the train, work at Burger King and dream of time and a half or at least making time. Devaun is the smooth talker but Jeron, at least at the start, is the brains. That's certainly true when Devaun takes a shine to Indira, clueless as to her tentative claims on womanhood.

With Indira as matchmaker for Joe and Nirmala and then Devaun as matchmaker for his pal and the girl at Burger King who thinks Jeron is cute, that leaves Devaun and Indira on their own when it comes to romance. They'll figure it out.

Thomas creates a sweet air of possibility in her show, aided by an effective scenic design under tight circumstances by Jason Simms and sharp lighting by Austin R. Smith to ease transitions. The costumes by Sydney Maresca include some intentionally godawful t-shirts and dresses that make Sanyal more feminine than one would have expected. And the cast is superior throughout, maintaining our sympathy from start to finish.

But Thomas makes numerous confusing detours that throw the play off and make us uncertain about where we're headed. First, the two young guys are seen as genial if harmless goofs. Devaun seems slightly dim -- he mispronounces numerous words -- while Jeron is smarter. But their initial role as humorous counterpoint falls away as Devaun asks Indira out, giving her a first taste of romance. Yet as that happens, they seem to become stupider by the minute, with not one but both of them garbling simple words again and again. It's both inconsistent and annoying.

Worse, they are involved in a confusing subplot wherein Devaun believes a local man who attends his church has hit on him. Devaun is 20 by the way. This man placed a hand on Devaun's shoulder in another bodega and says he has something to show him. Devaun freaks out and tells the man to back off. Later, the two young guys decide the man is a threat and might harm little kids, so they decide to put up posters around town warning people about this predator (which Devaun misconstrues as "predictor"). Huh? This is initially played for laughs and we can't help thinking this adult has wildly overreacted; but no harm since their poster is so vague it makes no sense.

Two problems. One, when discussing this incident in front of Indira, Devaun loses his cool and in violent language completely out of tone with the rest of the show he talks about viciously attacking that gay man for daring to make a pass at him. This occurs early in the show. So later when he and Indira begin to flirt, we remain deeply worried for her safety and wonder why she'd want to spend the evening with a guy who clearly would pose a threat if he never the physical realities of Indira's body. It creates an unpleasant sense of danger that doesn't mesh with the show, makes us question the common sense of the otherwise in charge and smart Indira and makes the climactic scene of the show actually hard to believe.

Cut out the virulent language and the finale is easier to believe, especially if refashioned. Devaun is supposed to be a mack daddy comfortable with sex, so if he isn't seen as a simmering threat and homophobe, when Indira delicately explains the surprise under her dress, we could be happily surprised if Devaun said, "So, you want me to take you from behind? Okay!" rather than merely being relieved he doesn't assault her.

The other problem is that the man Devaun was so obsessed over actually gets arrested by the police! Yet what is described doesn't sound anything like a crime, more like something kinky done between consenting adults. It literally makes no sense and again muddies the gentle air of romance the show aspires to.

These are serious flaws in tone and plot, along with a running obsession about the weather and some mild, unconvincing touches of near magic realism. Edit all this out and you'd have a much shorter, tighter and more effective play. There's no real need for an intermission except the show's current length.

But this doesn't detract from the generally delightful characters, aided immensely by the cast and direction of Topol. Williams and especially Redwood are very appealing and funny as the two friends, while making them specific enough so that they never descend into caricature. Graham doesn't shine in his one big, rambling monologue and Joe declares his love too quickly. (I blame the script.) But he too is appealing and very watchable in his quiet moments. Sanyal goes to town with his part and a little dialing back by the director would be helpful, especially in his big scene where he trembles repeatedly while thanking Krishna, milking it for all it's worth. But he's funny and honest for the most part. And Kakkar is excellent as the unloved wife beginning to see her self-worth.

I wish Thomas had been confident enough to make their victories more modest and real rather than so monumental. It would have been truer to the modest but very real people she has created.

THEATER OF 2014

[Beautiful: The Carole King Musical](#) ***

[Rodney King](#) ***