

Theater: Solid Sam Shepard, Half-Baked "Barbecue" And Muddled "Old Times"

Theater: Solid Sam Shepard, Half-Baked "Barbecue" And Muddled "Old Times"

FOOL FOR LOVE ** 1/2 out of ****

BARBECUE ** 1/2 out of ****

OLD TIMES ** out of ****

FOOL FOR LOVE ** 1/2 out of ****

MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE

I've spent my entire adult life watching the stock of playwright Sam Shepard fall. He was at his peak in the 1980s, with that iconic trade paperback of seven plays sporting his handsome mug on the cover.

That compilation was just a blip on the radar for Shepard. He starred in the landmark film Days of Heaven in 1978. He won the Pulitzer Prize for his play Buried Child in 1979. He received an Oscar nomination for his great work in 1983's The Right Stuff, a masterpiece by any measure. He co-wrote the Palme d'Or winner Paris, Texas in 1984, the same year that collection of plays became a fixture in bookstores around the world. No wonder he made the cover of Newsweek in 1986.

The plays kept coming: about one every three years since Seven Plays was published 31 years ago. But cruelly for someone so acclaimed and clearly devoted to his craft, they haven't become part of the repertory yet, not really. Buried Child played Broadway for two months in 1996. A praised revival of arguably his best play True West had a five month run in 2000 and received three Tony nominations. And now this revival of Fool For Love with Nina Arianda and Sam Rockwell. One play on Broadway in 1996, another in 2000 and now (finally) another in 2015. Shepard's new work has been seen at various venues Off Broadway to little success.

What do I think of Shepard as a playwright? How would I know? I haven't had a chance to see his best work performed by committed actors. (No wonder Signature devoted a season to Shepard back in 1996. For all their good work, it's a pity they don't continue that tradition.) So it's a pleasure to see four excellent actors tackle 1983's Fool For Love. And it's a disappointment to say that on my first viewing, it feels like a flawed work that has not dated well.

The set-up is simple: May (Arianda) is slumped over, sitting on the edge of a bed in a dumpy hotel room. The cowboy Eddie (Rockwell) is in a corner, taking a break from what is clearly an exhausting battle of wills. Off to the side (In the room? Outside? Metaphorically watching from above?) is an Old Man (Gordon Joseph Weiss). At first May clings to Eddie, then she pushes him away. She claws at him; he threatens her. She orders him to go then begs him to stay. He insists on leaving and then remains. The Old Man watches.

They're fools for love, obviously, and it's fun to watch. The tension is real (along with the humor) as we try and figure out who is toying with whom and whether they belong together and if being together will mean more battling or actual, genuine happiness. It feels meaty and real and while hardly revelatory is certainly satisfying, thanks to talent like Rockwell (sneakily charming as always) and Arianda (who is thoroughly at home and not flashy for a single moment despite the acclaim of recent years that might have sent anyone less grounded flying off into space).

Eddie has blown back into town and wants to -- maybe -- take May away with him. More tension arises for this on-again off-again couple with the arrival of May's date for the evening, a hapless local fellow (Tom Pelphrey) who just wants to take her out to a movie. Instead he becomes trapped in their game of truth-telling about what is really tearing them apart. Director Daniel Aukin has molded the cast into an excellent ensemble: his two leads are marvelous; Weiss is spot-on and Pelphrey was for me a revelation, wonderfully funny and dim-witted while holding his own onstage with two powerhouses, all with a minimum of dialogue. The tech elements were also strong, though I could have done without two visual and sonic flourishes (once at the beginning and once at the climax) that called too much attention to themselves.

But the play? It revolves around the revelation that this couple is related. They fooled around in high school only to discover that Eddie's father knocked up May's mother. Once upon a time, such was the stuff of Greek tragedy. Today it fails to shock (What? No gender confusion?). And once that twist was made clear, the play became less and less compelling. Perhaps I was too quick to credit this production. Certainly in retrospect I didn't sense the seeds of despair that should be driving it. Eddie's violence didn't seem the frustrated violence of one unexpectedly in love with his half-sister, just your run-of-the-mill violence. May's fickle attitude towards Eddie seemed powered only by his wandering attention, not by the turmoil of a love that dare not speak -- or even think -- its name.

And where in all this naturalistic fatalism does the rather fantastic off-stage character of The Countess fit in? A nutty rich woman who shoots up hotel rooms and sets fire to trucks hardly squares with a simmering tale aspiring to Sophoclean despair. I felt confusion over the big outburst of the Old Man and just a sense of anti-climax when Eddie and May kiss ferociously at the end. Since they already kissed earlier, the tension for a physical release was already dissipated. Sure, the first time we didn't know they were siblings, but what might have felt transgressive and powerful at the finale had already been undermined by the play itself.

Shepard is a terrific actor, an admirable artist and devoted to theater. I want to be a fool for his work -- I have ever since buying that collection back in college with student loan money I should have saved for food. I just wish I had more chances to judge his work where it belongs: on stage. Surely this showcase for four actors (and True West, which was catnip for the late Philip Seymour Hoffman and John C. Reilly) is proof he's worthy of more attention. It may reveal flaws but that's better than not being seen at all.

BARBECUE ** 1/2 out of ****
PUBLIC THEATER

Everyone's faith in playwright Robert O'Hara is thoroughly justified. He's whip-smart, funny, provocative and has a gift for entertaining. (I'll take entertaining over deep thoughts any day.) I didn't go over the moon like some with *Booty Candy*, but that often hilarious look at growing up gay was bursting with inventiveness, to say the least. *Barbecue* may be a little more flawed but it confirms O'Hara as a playwright you don't want to miss. It seems only a matter of time before he hits one out of the park.

A park, actually is the setting for his new play *Barbecue*. A family is gathered not to grill some meat but to confront one of their siblings, the out of control Barbara. Calling Barbara out of control is really saying something since all the other adults in this family boast a roll call of addictions and pathologies: alcohol, marijuana, meth (maybe), pills (certainly), busted relationships and dead-end jobs are all on the menu.

Barbara may not be quite ready for an intervention. Will she really cotton to the idea of heading to Alaska for yoga and group therapy? But if she gets out of hand -- a distinct possibility since razors-hidden-in-the-mouth is one play they worry about -- well, they've always got the rope, duct tape and Taser to fall back on.

So there you have it. A flawed play with a strong first act, a sputtering second act, a good cast and solid tech elements (especially the costumes by Paul Tazewell and the hair and wigs by Leah J. Loukas which work together in ways subtle and clever to keep it funny but real). O'Hara tosses a lot of plates in the air and -- while

many of them crash -- it's invigorating to watch. Barbecue employs some big switches (just like Fool For Love, which has a big reveal as well). As in Shepard's play, the Big Reveal is not terribly interesting and makes what came before it less interesting in retrospect. Meta playfulness is irresistible for a playwright with an unbridled imagination. But the discipline of rules and genre and structure (rather than always tearing that structure down) can be just what is needed to give that imagination focus. Here's hoping O'Hara works to use his distinctive voice in a context less freewheeling just to see what happens. I can't recommend Barbecue as strongly as Booty Candy. But if you're in New York City and a regular theater goer, O'Hara is clearly a talent you want to watch develop. By all means go.

SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT

Why are you still reading? I said spoiler alert! If you have any ability to see the play, walk away please. But Barbecue and its flaws are impossible to discuss without spoiling the multiple tricks that O'Hara plays with us. Literally impossible. So the first half of my review is for anyone who might go see it. Now for posterity, let's actually discuss the damn thing. Truly, it's no fun to even KNOW there's a spoiler much less dissect it. But what can one do? Not talk about the new play by a clearly bursting at the seams talent like O'Hara? So you've been amply warned.

The first big reveal is an absolute corker. The family -- led by the redoubtable Becky Ann Baker of Freaks & Geeks -- has discussed all possibilities while they wait nervously for Barbara. A violent, hilarious peak is reached when the lights go to black, the show pauses very briefly and then the lights come up and the action begins again...but the entire white cast has been replaced by black actors clearly playing the same characters in the same scene. It's head-spinning, unexpected and marvelously effective in super-charging the action.

The rest of the first act continues this by transitioning back and forth several times between the two sets of actors. A play about white trash has now become a play about black people held down economically. Or is it that a play that didn't seem to be about race now really is about race? Or maybe it's not race but class that we're dealing with? And why am I laughing more with the ensemble of black actors? You immediately question your own prejudices. Am I trained to be embarrassed or less amused by white trash since they reflect poorly on me, a white man? Or am I seductively encouraged to laugh at black folk as a subtle form of racism that reinforces racial stereotypes perpetuated by white society?

Naturally, I decided I wasn't racist (no one ever decides they are racist, do they?) and that the black cast was in fact stronger across the board. However, I was also aware of a heightened reality present when the black cast was performing. Their roles and jokes were broader and bigger -- it was meant to be funnier. I think. Or I'm just a jerk. This was a rich vein O'Hara had opened and it was fully worth exploring for an entire play. Unfortunately...

SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT SPOILER ALERT

Okay, there's another Big Reveal. In truth, a great work should be able to survive knowing about the "twist." You can enjoy and appreciate it even if you know something the original audience didn't. (It's a sled.) Still, it's certainly more fun not knowing, if possible. So if you're in NYC and might go to the show and kept reading past the first Spoiler Alert, for heaven's sake, stop now! On the other hand, you'll find out why the play that started out so strongly became so muddled.

After the switching between casts, act one climaxed with yet another switch. As the black cast was on stage, suddenly Barbara (Tamberla Perry) shouted out "Cut!" and the stage was swarmed by cameramen and sound guys and PAs and all the other folk on a film crew. The audience, already blindsided by the brilliant ploy of swapping out casts, exploded in mirth. So this is being filmed? I assumed it was reality TV we'd be spoofing, but in fact act two revealed that we were watching the actual events of an intervention (later made famous by

Barbara's best-selling triumph-over-addiction memoir) interspersed with a cast of black actors filming it for a movie.

Act Two goes way, way down hill as we jump back a little and watch a world famous Whitney Houston-type singer and actress (played by Perry) meet with the "real" Barbara (Samantha Soule) in that same park. The self-absorbed diva is searching for authentic details and deciding whether to make the movie we've watched her film throughout act one. The energy and inventiveness disappears and the play slowly loses steam as it plods to a close.

Perry's diva is a boring stereotype that also makes no sense: she's from the ghetto but puts on a fake British accent? When authenticity is the coin of the realm in the pop world and not one she'd run from? We're supposed to seesaw back and forth as we watch these two women search for power over the other. The movie star blathers on and occasionally reveals how little Barbara means to her. Revelations pile up, each one less meaningful and interesting than the last: the memoir is faked, the diva is an addict, one or both of them is a lesbian and so on.

While act one juxtaposed "real" people with cinematic portrayals that were exaggerated, in act two all we get are "real" people who seem a lot more fake than everyone in act one. Potentially the most powerful scene -- when the diva demands the clean Barbara do some crystal meth -- becomes a throw-away moment when clearly it should have been the manipulative pivot of the entire act. How far will a diva go to demonstrate power or gain an Oscar worthy project? How far will a recovering addict go to cash in? And does dignity even come into the equation? Everything here is less interesting, including the performances of the two women since their characters become more cardboard by the second.

It's very confusing. On the one hand, O'Hara clearly has a fertile imagination. On the other hand, he had an absolutely brilliant concept -- switching between an all black and all white cast -- that was plenty for an entire play. It should have been the sole "trick" in the show, one that was worthy of exploring deeply and imaginatively. I feel almost cheated that this clever and potentially penetrating gambit was squandered. On the other (other?) hand, he came up with that idea, didn't he?

OLD TIMES ** out of ****

ROUNABOUT THEATRE COMPANY AT AMERICAN AIRLINES THEATRE

The soufflé did not rise. Truly, what else can one say about a production of Harold Pinter that doesn't work? One can see a decent production of Oscar Wilde or Horton Foote, a good performance here and there and all of it...okay, But Pinter (and Brecht and that ilk)? Their work is so ambiguous and off kilter that either it clicks or it doesn't. This one most assuredly doesn't. That isn't to say your experience at Pinter is either euphoric or nightmarish. Far from it. The three actors are to varying degrees solid, the production is certainly enjoyably risk-taking (at least visually) and unlike some truly off the rails productions that flop entirely, it's hardly an endurance test. But does it rise? Does it breathe? Sadly, no.

This is the first time I've seen Pinter's Old Times so I have nothing to compare it to, no way to know what power plays and intriguing shifts in balance can take place when it's done well. Deely (Clive Owen) and Kate (Kelly Reilly) are at home. I use the term "home" loosely, since the set by Christine Jones depicts a striking vortex looming over them at all times while a giant slab of ice is a stand-in for a door or perhaps a window. A tad abstract, but hardly out of place for the oft-surreal Pinter. They banter about a dinner guest soon to arrive. Anna (Eve Best) is an old friend of Kate, though Kate clarifies by saying Anna was and is her only friend. She has no other friends, not really.

Typically for Pinter, they are fencing with words. Anna arrives and a sexy, provocative presence she is indeed. Anna and Deely seem to be battling each other for supremacy; they're trying to prove which one of them is more important, more crucial to Kate (or at least the person Kate has become)? Inevitably, the somewhat passive

Kate will make her own move for domination before all is said and done.

Reilly is the least satisfying here and Best the most. Owen is very solidly in the middle, proving himself a strong and promising stage presence, fully at home and ready to play. One must point the finger at director Douglas Hodge. Whatever music is to be found in this Pinter play remains unheard. Whatever drama, mostly unseen. Whatever sense the scenic design and the vaguely period costumes of Constance Hoffman might have made unexplained. Whatever impact the modest visual and sonic pow of key moments delivered by Thom Yorke (music), Japhy Weideman (lighting) and sound (Clive Goodwin) unfelt.

I really have no idea what Pinter is up to in this play. But I'm certain Hodge and his team haven't figured it out either.

THEATER OF 2015

[Honeymoon In Vegas](#) **

[The Woodsman](#) ***

[Constellations](#) ** 1/2

[Taylor Mac's A 24 Decade History Of Popular Music 1930s-1950s](#) ** 1/2

[Let The Right One In](#) **

Da no rating

[A Month In The Country](#) ** 1/2

[Parade in Concert at Lincoln Center](#) ** 1/2

[Hamilton at the Public](#) ***

[The World Of Extreme Happiness](#) ** 1/2

[Broadway By The Year 1915-1940](#) **

[Verite](#) * 1/2

[Fabulous!](#) *

[The Mystery Of Love & Sex](#) **

[An Octoroon at Polonsky Shakespeare Center](#) *** 1/2

[Fish In The Dark](#) *

[The Audience](#) ***

[Josephine And I](#) ***

[Posterity](#) * 1/2

[The Hunchback Of Notre Dame](#) **

[Lonesome Traveler](#) **

[On The Twentieth Century](#) ***

[Radio City Music Hall's New York Spring Spectacular](#) ** 1/2

[The Heidi Chronicles](#) *

[The Tallest Tree In The Forest](#) * 1/2

[Broadway By The Year: 1941-1965](#) ***

[Twelfth Night by Bedlam](#) ***

[What You Will by Bedlam](#) *** 1/2

[Wolf Hall Parts I and II](#) ** 1/2

[Skylight](#) ***

[Nellie McKay at 54 Below](#) ***

[Ludic Proxy](#) ** 1/2

[It Shoulda Been You](#) **

[Finding Neverland](#) ** 1/2

[Hamlet w Peter Sarsgaard at CSC](#) no stars

[The King And I](#) ***