

Theater: Strong But Cracked "Bridge," Miserable "Misery," And Pledging "Allegiance"

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MISERY * out of ****

A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE *** out of ****

ALLEGIANC ** ½ out of ****

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BROADHURST THEATRE

A bad idea poorly executed, a stage adaptation of the Oscar-winning film Misery has been kicking around for years. It's hard to know why. What might seem creepy on film plays as silly and campy on stage. We sit and watch best-selling author Paul Sheldon trapped in the home of his "number one fan" Annie Wilkes after a car accident left him with two broken legs.

Rather creepily, the audience awaits and applauds two iconic moments in the tension-free show: the scene where Annie crushes his ankles with a sledge-hammer and the scene where Paul chokes her to death. Since that signals the end is near, insert here your own joke about being put out of misery.

Clearly, fans are there to see Bruce Willis as Paul and the excellent stage actress Laurie Metcalf as Annie. Willis has goodwill to spare, from Moonlighting to the Die Hard films and beyond. Metcalf of course won multiple Emmys for Roseanne and appears on The Big Bang Theory and other shows regularly.

Willis struggles to project to the back of the theater and delivers most every line in a low-key, off-hand manner, whether he's asking for some water or trying to convince Annie not to kill them both. While his fumbles with the lines are not surprising (he hasn't been on stage in decades) even Metcalf stumbled here and there on the night I saw it, a distressing sight for such a veteran.

But no one is in good form. Why does director Will Frears place a microphone on one side of the stage and have the infirm Paul enter on the other side at the denouement? Once the applause has died down for seeing Willis up close, there's dead silence as he slowly makes his way to the mike, a problem easily fixed by having him enter on the other side (or placing the mike stage center).

Why does scenic designer David Korins represent Annie's room above Paul's with a tiny thin triangle of a window and light? It looks like a crawl space or attic, when we clearly see there's another floor about Paul's. It makes the scene where she breaks the lamp in frustration seem silly and is distracting and unnecessary whenever else it's seen.

Why does Annie tidy up in the kitchen before the end? Her home seems to be sinking into dishevelment, mirroring Annie's increasingly unhinged behavior. Dishes are piling up everywhere in classic, someone-doesn't-care-anymore style. But when the local sheriff pops in (Leon Addison Brown in a minor part), suddenly we see the kitchen is spic and span. Perhaps that's what happened in the movie? Playwright William Goldman is nothing if not faithful to his film script.

Somebody knows something, because the reviews won't matter here. Willis will either decide Broadway was a

bad idea or dive into something better down the road. Metcalf will hungrily move on to the next, more demanding, more interesting part. And Goldman will hopefully turn again to something more challenging and fulfilling, like that stage adaptation of *The Princess Bride*.

A VIEW FROM THE BRIDGE *** out of **** **LYCEUM THEATRE**

It's always Arthur Miller season in the theater. *Death Of A Salesman* is revived with regularity, as it should be. (Objecting to that is like objecting to another *King Lear*. Of course you want it done well, but it needs to be done.) This season we have *Incident At Vichy* being staged at Signature Theatre. In the spring we'll get to see the highly anticipated new production of *The Crucible* from directorial It Boy Ivo Van Hove. And right now we've got Van Hove's transfer of his London production of *A View From The Bridge*.

Like Julie Taymor, Van Hove has a fertile, visually striking sensibility -- he's great on the big, bold, conceptual idea. But also like Taymor he seems less interested in the nuts and bolts of finding the right actor for every part and honing a disparate group of people into an ensemble.

Bridge is a complex and probably fiendishly difficult play to get right. (It's my first time seeing it.) Some of his conceits worked brilliantly; others left me cold but didn't notably detract. But with just six key parts, having two of them so poorly cast made a strong evening of theater seem a dreadful disappointment for being so close to greatness. A little more care and this would have been a classic staging.

Eddie (Mark Strong) is a man's man, working the docks of New York. He's got a no-nonsense wife Beatrice (Nicola Walker) and they shelter her niece Catherine (Phoebe Fox), the apple of Eddie's eye who still leaps into his arms when he gets home from work but is clearly no longer a little girl but a young woman.

Catherine is 17 years old and the best in her stenography class. But when she's offered a job, Eddie wants to hear nothing about it. She's too young! Her new skirt is too short! She walks with too much...enthusiasm! Catherine is blossoming and Eddie can't handle it. He isn't just worried about Catherine; he's worried about his own reaction as well. Though a typical tight-lipped male incapable of discussing his emotions, we soon realize Eddie and Beatrice aren't making like husband and wife for a while. She sees what's going on and does what she can by confronting Eddie and talking to Catherine. He hasn't crossed a line yet, but everyone knows the line is there now and it wasn't there before.

That line is obliterated when Beatrice's two cousins from Italy slip into the country illegally. Italy is stagnant and they've come, desperate for work. Marco (Michael Zegen) just wants to make money so his wife can buy medicine for their son. In a few years he'll return. Rodolpho (Russell Tovey), however, loves America and wants to stay.

He likes to sing and make jokes and everyone on the docks seems to like him, though god knows Rodolpho is...different. He's blond for one thing, apparently an unknown phenomenon for a man in 1950s New York, at least down by the docks. When Rodolpho and Catherine start dating, Eddie is beside himself. Through paranoia or intuition, he's decided Rodolpho is gay (a word Eddie can't bring himself to say, of course) and is just using Catherine for marriage so he can stay legally. Beatrice knows the real source of this jealousy but Eddie is beside himself with inchoate rage and he'll do anything, anything to keep them apart.

All of this, by the way, is staged in a boxing ring. Well, not really a boxing ring, but the set is a square space like a boxing ring. The actors prowl around it barefoot, circling each other warily as they dance their dance. A wall ascends at the beginning of the show to reveal this death match and descends slowly at the finale as the inevitable tragic ending comes to a close.

It's simple, elegant and very effective, in one stroke revealing the universal and theatrical nature of this tale while emphasizing the brutal showdown taking place. (The excellent scenic and lighting design are by Jan

Versweyveld.) This is brought home even more by having additional seating for the audience on both sides of the stage a la an actual boxing match, which based on the staging I think would make satisfying seats.

Perhaps a little less effective is the sound design by Tom Gibbons. It includes an almost continuous hum, along with snatches of a requiem that builds and builds throughout. It certainly increased and underlined the tension and was appropriately bold, as Van Hove clearly prefers. But there were moments when it overwhelmed the dialogue a little too much. An D'huys did the solid costumes.

Other meta-touches weren't so rewarding. In one bizarre section, the actors faced off from various corners, a drum beat began and they delivered their lines in isolation, with extended pauses between a statement from one actor and a response by another. It sort of worked but then it didn't and seemed more like an acting exercise unwisely left in. The flourish of a bloody rainfall at the end left me unmoved, though it was not a minus either.

But whether the actors are naked and sitting in cardboard boxes or dressed fully and appearing on a naturalistic set, what really matters are the performances. Strong and the two women in his life - Walker and Fox - are exceptional and make this flawed but interesting production a must-see. Walker brings such authority and a lived life to her scenes as the wife that you never doubt her for a moment.

Fox has the very tricky role of the sexually blooming Catherine. One could easily see this role played as a vixen, a sex kitten in training or as faux-innocent sexual or in a hundred other wrong-minded ways. But Fox makes Catherine exactly what she should be: a little girl becoming a young woman, slowly aware of her appeal to men but basically good-hearted and never vampy or teasing towards Eddie.

And Strong is superb as the angry, confused, willfully ignorant Eddie. He too strikes a balance that is difficult to pull off, keeping our sympathies with this man even as he slowly fails to fool anyone, least of all himself.

Michael Gould is also good as the narrator and lawyer that Eddie consults, despite given a mouthful of dialogue that sets the scene in prose verging on the purple.

It's the two immigrants where this production falls woefully short. They are both dreadfully out of place physically and in accent, both for their specific roles and with each other. Michael Zegen (of *Bad Jews*) is supposed to be the strong, dominating but silent Marco, a rock of a man who strives to send every penny to his wife and can intimidate even the burly, whipcord tough Eddie. Zegen, however, is just too small for the part as written. He's dwarfed by his brother and Eddie and every other character on stage. This guy is supposed to make a display of strength that quietly cows Eddie and then in a rage threaten him at the climax? Zegen's accent - attempting an Italian immigrant new to America - is also no good fit, especially since it's so out of sync with that of his brother.

Russell Tovey plays the blonde Rodolpho and certainly looks like an Italian circa some Danish stock. (That's how they explain the apparently confounding fact that he's blonde.) Tovey puts Zegen in his shadow physically; yet when he's shirtless Tovey looks more like a Chelsea gym bunny than a rock hard Italian immigrant. Worse, this British actor (a member of the legendary original cast of *The History Boys*) seems to have no accent much at all, landing on some vague pronunciation that is especially jarring next to his brother's movie-land conception of an Italian accent.

They've clearly chosen not to play the character as actually gay (it's all in Eddie's fevered brain for this production). But the result of those clashing accents, discordant appearance from the script and non-threatening nature of Rodolpho's sexuality (either gay or straight, he seems awfully harmless) is that these two disrupting forces, the men that are supposed to upset the already fragile balance of Eddie's home barely register at all. They seem so innocent, so passive, so unremarkable that the sense of sex or danger that they should exude is entirely missing.

Without a romantic foil for his love or a physical foil for his rage, Eddie has no one to fight against except himself. That wouldn't matter so much if it weren't all staged in a boxing ring. Despite this, Strong and Walker

and Fox battle each other with enough fireworks to make the evening well worth seeing. It's a pity the undercard was not up to snuff.

ALLEGIANCE ** ½ out of **** LONGACRE THEATRE

It's inevitable: of course you have certain expectations before seeing a show. Avoid any summaries or out of town reviews though you might, you're still going to have an idea as to what a show is like and whether it will be any good. (Though believe me, no one wants to be pleasantly surprised more than a critic who goes to several shows a week.)

So like you, I had a certain idea about Allegiance, a new musical about the shameful internment of American citizens during World War II just because they were from Japan or had Japanese ancestry. I knew that Germans actually landed in the US to commit acts of war, that German spy rings were actually busted up and Italians with fascist sympathies also longed to be a fifth column. And yet Italians and Germans were never rounded up and placed in camps. Just Americans of Japanese descent.

A show about this would surely be noble and well-intentioned and probably a bore, especially when you discover it was a passion project of actor George Takei (now and forever known for Star Trek). Beware of passion projects.

So let me happily report that Allegiance is not tiresomely noble. Nor does it waste its time pointing out the obvious injustice of what happened. Instead, it creates vivid drama from the conflicts in the Japanese American community. Some wanted to fight back by actually fighting: they were hungry to enlist and ultimately all-Japanese American units (akin to the all black units) served nobly and took on suicidal missions all in a desire to prove their patriotism.

Others fought back by refusing the draft when they were finally called up. (Initially, Japanese Americans simply weren't allowed to enlist.) They said they'd fight for their country the minute their families were released from the prison of these camps. Still others refuse to sign a loyalty pledge (no one else in America was asked to sign) and are sent to more brutal conditions. Caught in the middle is Mike Masaoka (Greg Watanabe), the head of the Japanese American Citizens League, the de facto voice of this community. Toss in a little romance and some musical numbers and you've got yourself a show!

Unfortunately, the book of Allegiance by Marc Acito, Jay Kuo and Lorenzo Thione is by far the strongest element of the show. The scenic design by Donyale Werle is capable but probably forced to do too much with too little funds. The costumes by Alejo Vietti are better and indeed the tech elements are delivered with care.

But a musical lives and dies by its songs. Many a show has a weak book but gets revived by a great score. Few with a great book but a weak score are ever remembered. Allegiance may avoid that fate since it's a rare musical to offer strong roles for Asian actors. But the music and lyrics by Kuo while moving the plot forward are rarely good enough to stand out on their own.

It begins strongly with the show's best number: "Wishes On The Wind." Sammy (a very appealing Telly Leung) is back home for the harvest, worried about telling his dad he's failed to get into law school. Sammy doesn't really want to be a lawyer. His sister Kei (Lea Salonga) is the smart one. But his dad (Christophen Nomura) doesn't want to hear it. Sammy thinks his dad has resented him ever since Sammy's mom died giving birth to him. His sister is practically Sammy's mom, having raised him from a baby.

But all this family drama falls away after the attack on Pearl Harbor. In quick order, Sammy is laughed away by the draft board even though he's eager to fight. In a sign of conflict to come, his father and sister refuse to fly an American flag the way Sammy wants, fearing it will just bring attention to themselves ("Do Not Fight The Storm").

Before you know it, they're all packed off to camps in the middle of nowhere while neighbors they thought were friends buy up their homes and businesses at rock bottom prices. Sammy finds some strength by organizing people in the camp, encouraging baseball games and dances and the like. He also fancies the nice white nurse Hannah (Katie Rose Clark) who feels sorry for their plight. Kei meanwhile is drawn to Frankie (Michael K. Lee), a fellow prisoner with very different ideas of how to fight this injustice.

Eventually, Sammy is off to war, his dad off to a work camp for defying the loyalty pledge and their family is torn apart seemingly forever by the divisions that split them during this stressful, terrible time.

One wishes more of the songs had the cynical snap of Frankie's "Paradise" or the end of the war anthem "442 Victory Swing." Too often, the numbers echo the noble air one assumed the entire show would embody, with a single voice joined by others and ending with a large group facing the audience in defiance by the end. But even the good numbers don't quite wow; "Paradise" should be a show-stopper but the choreography of Andrew Palermo and staging of director Stafford Arima can't quite sell it.

Other problems include an almost inherently unsatisfying ending: In this story, our hero remains estranged from his family for the rest of their lives. So in the last few minutes, we get the end of the war, heart-wrenching news, the passage of decades and a bittersweet conclusion. I don't mind a downer but this one barely lets you catch your breath. And when a show includes the hateful act of internment and a vividly done nod towards the terrible destruction of Hiroshima, perhaps a stronger sense of hopefulness wouldn't be so out of place.

Still, Allegiance does have a complicated and for the most part satisfying book. George Takei is winning as both our hero in old age and the grandfather of young Sammy. Lea Salonga gives depth to the sister, Watanabe is nicely defensive as Masaoka, Nomura memorable as Sammy's stubborn dad and Leung himself holds the stage with a winning, sexy appeal as our hero. Even smaller roles are often handled well, with the handsome Dan Horn a notable standout as actor, singer and dancer in various minor parts.

In all, despite a weak score, they can be proud - a show that might have been tiresomely noble is instead admirably noble by showing its allegiance to the truth (however complicated and grey) and thus truly honors the people who lived it.

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Da no rating

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