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## Theater: Tempting "Vanity Fair," "Latin History For Morons," And Cheers For Public Studio

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VANITY FAIR \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

LATIN HISTORY FOR MORONS \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

ON THE GROUNDS OF BELONGING (workshop production)

VANITY FAIR \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

PEARL THEATRE CO.

William Makepeace Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair* has been admired more from a distance than clutched to the modern heart. Certainly it isn't beloved and celebrated (and certainly not adapted to stage and screen) in the promiscuous way of Dickens and Austen and Trollope and Eliot. That's odd since *Vanity Fair* is A Novel Without A Hero, which is to say it has an anti-hero. Its sensibility and style include a self-aware female protagonist and a baldly meta narrative in which the novel is presented as a puppet show. That should make it perfect for our times.

But capturing the willful Becky Sharp — who simply refuses to pander for our support — isn't easy. Director Mira Nair's misguided recent film version simply dumped half the storyline and all the sense of the book. Earlier attempts haven't really stood the test of time either.

Yet here is Pearl Theater having a go. Kate Hamill had a remarkable and deserved success adapting Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* for Bedlam and she's done it again here. Hamill stars as Becky and positively relishes the role of a woman who refuses to be judged. The seven member cast brings alive a dozen or so characters (it seems), all of it fluidly directed by Eric Tucker of Bedlam (who also directed *Sense and Sensibility* so brilliantly). All are excellent, though special mention must be made of Hamill, Joey Parsons (who tackles the tiresome and nigh on impossible part of the cluelessly "good" Amelia) and Zachary Fine who plays our master of ceremonies, the hilarious Miss Matilda and the very menacing Lord Steyne.

The direction, the acting, the tech elements all work in concert but above all it's the canny script of Hamill that shines. She captures the sweep of the novel and its many ideas with spot-on choices. That begins with setting this vanity-fair of life's temptations at an actual seaside fair full of sideshows and freaks and people ready to pick your pocket or laugh at your despair. Even better, Hamill makes great use of the stage to parallel the story of Becky and Amelia again and again, making Thackeray's point of not judging even better than he did.

After this satisfying evening, you're tempted to send her your favorite novels in hope of inspiring her next show. Would the dour Brontë sisters be too lacking in humor for her to tackle, say, *Wuthering Heights*? What about *Little Dorrit*? Or Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*?



**Photo © Russ Rowland.**

The possibilities are endless, which is precisely the feeling one has when seeing the cast of *Vanity Fair* in action. If the evening is more intellectually stimulating than emotionally gripping, ultimately that's due to the limitations of what Thackeray created in his Punch & Judy of a morality tale. (Yes, I'm not fond of the novel. *Don't judge!*) It also means the rare moments when the satire steps aside and genuine drama comes forth are even more powerful.

For all its incident, the story is simple. Becky and Amelia are dear friends at finishing school, where Amelia is the much-petted favorite and the sharp-tongued Becky (a charity case who works like a dog to maintain her

position) generally disdained. They must both get on with their roles in life. For the women of their particular stations, that means making the right marriage. Amelia is a “good” girl who cares for her childhood sweetheart and can never imagine that spineless fellow doing wrong. Becky is a “bad” girl because she recognizes her lot in life and fights against it. Nonetheless, she has far fewer options and must leap at the best opportunity she can. And off they go, with each at times being respectable and at times falling on hard luck,. Yet Amelia is always respectable even at her most destitute moments while Becky is shockingly out of place, even when begrudgingly allowed into high society. Worse for her, Becky knows how hypocritical society is, not to mention that if she were a man and free to make her way in the world, no one would blink twice at her drive.

Becky is very smart but one or two crucial mistakes leave her life in tatters. Both women have a genuine friendship for one another and both fail that friendship at certain times. Hamill has the most fun when allowing her characters to voice the objections of Thackeray, who would chide the reader for judging them harshly from the comfort of their positions of prominence. We expect Becky to mock our piety but when Amelia finally gets to take us to task, it’s thrilling. “You think I’m a fool,” she tells the audience late in the show and yes indeed, we have been. “You think I’m soft. I can see it. You’ll go back to your comfortable homes tonight and say, oh, that stupid girl, I didn’t like her, what a sap. Why didn’t she ever *think*? But I’m trying my best.”

It’s a great moment, powered by the entire structure of the play, which presents the travails of these two women as concurrently as possible and thus shows again and again how limited and constrained women are no matter what they do. Choose what society expects or choose what your heart (or brain) wants and you can still choose wrong. Neither the good girl nor the bad girl are safe from the vagaries of life or the judgement of society. And being proper is a luxury many can’t afford.

So why play it safe? At the very least you’ll be assured of having fun. Playwright and star Hamill hasn’t and the result here is another success. Her upcoming adaptation of *Pride & Prejudice* in November can’t come soon enough.

LATIN HISTORY FOR MORONS \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

## PUBLIC THEATER

*Vanity Fair* works so well because the adaptation by Kate Hamill devised a brilliant structure when adapting that sprawling novel to the stage. John Leguizamo’s latest one-man show fails because its structure is especially weak, betraying a story that didn’t burn to be told. The modest set-up is this: John’s son is being bullied by a kid, who taunts the gentle, nice person by calling him a “beaner” and other derogatory terms. John approaches the boy’s dad, saying hey, if the guy’s kid is going to pick on his son at least the kid could use the right racial slur. (“Beaner” is a derogatory slur for Mexicans.) It doesn’t go well and Leguizamo realizes he doesn’t know enough about his own Latino history to have a ready comeback when the dad mocks him. This gets conflated with a school assignment for the son to do a project on his favorite hero and Leguizamo spends the rest of the show trying to bond with his son while learning tidbits of Latin history and sharing it with

the audience.

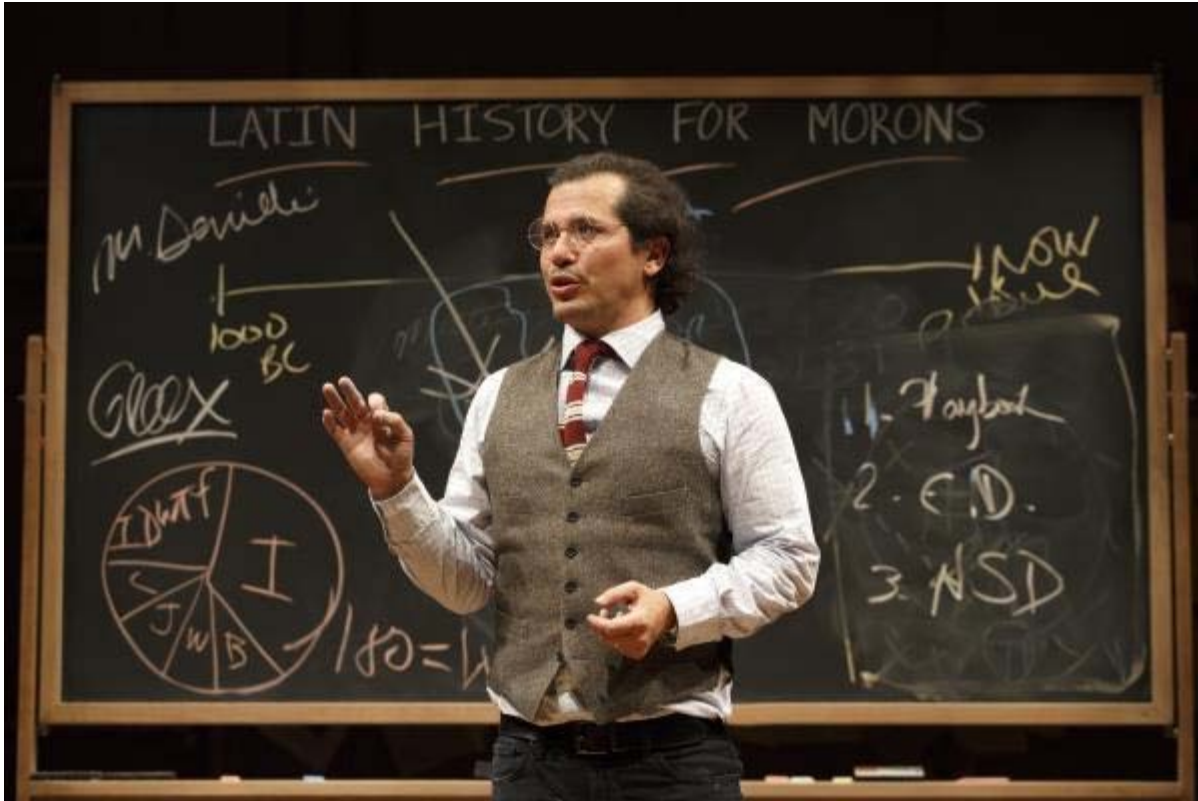


Photo © Joan Marcus

Leguizamo rightly has a great deal of goodwill banked with his fans after a lifetime of acting in countless films and plays while creating his autobiographical one-man shows. It's always fun to see him capturing his wife, daughter, son, uncle, therapist and so on with deft characterizations.

But the personal spine of the show feels particularly slight, just an excuse for Leguizamo to offer up some highlights from Latin history. Unfortunately, this is far less specific or engaging than even the mild family material. Yes, it's amusing to see him offer up fake war dances and heartening to know Howard Zinn's *A People's History Of The United States* can still blow minds. Unfortunately, the facts Leguizamo learns are random and unmoored to any greater narrative; he doesn't even nail any vivid historical characters.

It's all so shapeless that everything begins to feel like an interruption of everything else. The family drama stops for a quick history lesson which then stops for a comic aside on trying to come up with good insults when you don't want to offend anyone's sensibilities (or just don't want to come across as a jerk). And then it jerks back to more history or more family tales or more asides, none of them particularly engaging. History most certainly does not come alive here. But what's surprising is that neither does Leguizamo.

ON THE GROUNDS OF BELONGING

## PUBLIC THEATER

This is not a review of the play! Don't expect a star rating or an analysis of the play's structure or (too many) comments on the excellent cast. This is a "review" of sorts of Public Studio. That's a program run by the Public Theater to give playwrights a chance to see their work in front of a live audience. It's more than a reading and less than a fully mounted production — but really it's a gift to the playwright, who works with the Public and a top-notch director and cast and crew, gets perhaps two weeks of rehearsals and then sees the play a week or two in front of a paying audience. Go to Public Studio in the past and you might have caught the Broadway musical *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* in its early stages or a host of other pieces that went on to greater fame. More importantly, you get to support playwrights and actors and directors.

I went to *On The Grounds Of Belonging* simply because Bobby Steggert was in the cast. Not only is he an excellent actor, but he's got excellent taste. (The two do not go hand in hand, by any stretch.) If he's involved in a project Off Broadway or Off Off, you know it's going to be of interest, at the very least.

Turns out the play by Ricardo Pérez González happens to be set in the 1950s in Houston Texas in a local gay bar that caters to blacks. (Next door is the local gay bar that caters to whites.) Steggert's character stumbles in one night, meets a regular and then things get romantically and racially complicated. So Steggert lured me in but an excellent cast (especially Christopher Livingston and Chris Myers, the other two sides of this love triangle) and very strong writing kept me engaged for the brisk 90 minute running time. (They were matched by bar manager Mike Hodge, white bar manager Craig Bockhorn and singer Tanya Starr; all were top-notch.) As is, *On The Grounds Of Belonging* is better than most plays I see on Broadway or Off. The courtship between Steggert and Livingston is winning and once they figure out the third act, it's going to be even better. (I suggest dropping all the last minute melodrama, keep to the specific and real drama of falling in love and make it about Steggert and Myers competing for Livingston's heart.) But whatever direction González decides, I look forward to seeing *On The Grounds of Belonging* in its next incarnation and whatever he does after.

So sure, it's fun to see a project that leaps to fame and fortune. Sometimes, as with this play, you get the thrill of discovery, as I did with González. But it's also great just to see actors and directors and writers working in a small space on a labor of love. So make sure you support Public Studio. Up next? *Wild Goose Dreams* by playwright Hansol Jung and directed by Leigh Silverman, which sounds fascinating. Now I just have to make sure I get a ticket before I post this story!

### 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)

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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.***