



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

Theater: The Spoils Of 'War;' Cirque vs. Broadway

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WAR ** out of ****

PARAMOUR * 1/2 out of ****

WAR ** out of ****

LCT3

Playwright Branden Jacobs-Jenkins delivered An Octoroon, one of my favorite theatrical experiences of recent years, a show bursting with talent. But it's concerning that by far the most satisfying work he's done depended on a pre-existing melodrama for its plot and structure. Indeed, he is consistently provocative and ambitious but not so consistent at delivering character and story. Once again with his new show War, we have button-pushing elements, some nimble and distinctive monologues worth re-reading...and a story that fails to engage on a very basic level.

It begins strongly. Roberta (Charlayne Woodard) is in a coma after suffering an unexplained collapse. Naturally, her children are freaking out. Joanne (Rachel Nicks) has to deal with conflicted emotions about a mother she had a prickly relationship with, a gay brother Tate (Chris Myers) all too eager to take control and a strange woman who is sitting in her mom's room at the hospital. Elfriede (Michele Slay) barely speaks English and insists she is Roberta's sister even though Joanne and Tate have never even heard of her, much less met her.

Toss in Joanne's genially hapless white husband Malcolm (Reggie Gowland), Elfriede's pushy, elbows-out son Tobias (Austin Durant) and a nurse who brooks no nonsense on his floor (Lance Coadie Williams) and you've got a formula for a solid family drama. Old grudges will reappear, new revelations will surface and some sort of new understanding will assert itself.



(PHOTO BY ERIN BAIANO)

For fitful passages of the first act, that's precisely what happens. We learn about Joanne's tenuous relationship with her mom thanks to Tate's caustic comments. We also learn Tate has broken up with his boyfriend of several years and that his decision to move back home to deal with things might be more self-serving than it first appeared.

But there's a problem. Just as the story develops some steam, we cut to the subconscious mind of Roberta as she wrestles with the decision to wake up or simply drift away. Does anyone need her? This monologue takes place in a dream-scape where the male nurse and eventually all the other characters parade around like primates, grunting and beating their chests, albeit in a certain dignified manner.

This continues throughout the show, with the action taking place interrupted by Roberta's dream reveries, sometimes filling us in on details about this sister she discovered in Germany (her dad fathered Elfreide during WW II) and her feelings about her kids. Mostly it's a waste of time. We figure out this person is her daughter and they didn't always get along. Then in her subconscious, Roberta goes through this process all over again: who are these people? Oh yes, that's my daughter? Do I like her? No, I don't really get along with her. And so on and so on. The odd, surreal scenes in her coma world offer almost no information we haven't already discovered on our own and the rest could be easily presented.

Dramatically, they serve no purpose. Worse, the drama they might have included fails to appear. Roberta is wrestling whether to wake up again (whether to live!) and who would need her if she did return to life. It doesn't get more elemental than that, yet we never really see her grapple with the choice before her and Roberta's final decision flits by without us really even noticing. Essentially, everything taking place in her subconscious could be removed and the show would be better for it.

Race of course is always an issue, with Tate laying into his sister, casually accusing her of self-hatred for marrying Malcolm and then cross-examining him about how he sees their children. Mixed race? Wrong

answer. But the actors getting down on the floor and imitating primates? It's really a red herring, despite a poster for the show that depicts a gorilla (?) wearing a military helmet and looking poised for battle. We soon realize Roberta collapsed at a zoo and was looking at the primates, thus their presence in her dream. If there's anything more to it, that escaped me. Frankly, Tate's takedown of Malcolm felt more like a cheap shot than some necessary dressing down.

With half the show set in a dreamland that merely interrupts the action rather than adding to it, *War* becomes a slog. Worse is act two, where the production design of Mimi Lien fails the show. Act One is set mostly in the hospital room. Act Two features a generic room in front, with a couch, some chairs and a shelf with some random items on it. Behind that we can still see the hospital bed and some medical equipment. Since almost nothing happens in the hospital room, that background clutter is unnecessary. Worse, the room we're looking at is so bland and antiseptic, I assumed it was a nicer hospital room that was gussied up to feel like "home." Or perhaps it was a hotel room? But it's supposed to be Roberta's home. Since Roberta is a wealthy woman with smarts and sophisticated taste, the idea that this bland room with ugly green carpeting and the most anonymous collection of items reflects her personality is just absurd. It takes forever to figure out where we are and between that and the clutter in the background, it's a serious negative factor in act two.

Further derailing the act is Elfreide's big speech, a laborious recitation she wrote down so she wouldn't forget it. It was so pointless and went on so long, I was astonished Tate didn't interrupt her or at least ask her son, "Exactly how much more of this is there?"

Jacobs-Jenkins had a strong set up here. The adult children in crisis who have to deal with a strange, pushy German man and his fading mother (Elfreide has dementia) was ripe with potential. Casting director Daniel Swee assembled a strong cast to bring the story to life. Everyone is spot-on, from Myers bringing Nate so immediately to life I knew precisely who this character was the moment he stepped on stage to Durant keeping us guessing about the fiercely desperate Tobias all the way to the end. And it has the grace to end on a strong note back at the zoo. Credit to director Lileana Blain-Cruz and her cast for making the most of the material at hand. Still, it's a pity that a possibly straight-forward drama felt the need to interject oddball touches that ill-served the story. At this point, the most provocative stance Jacobs-Jenkins could take would be to embrace the challenges of a simple narrative.

PARAMOUR * 1/2 out of ****

LYRIC THEATRE

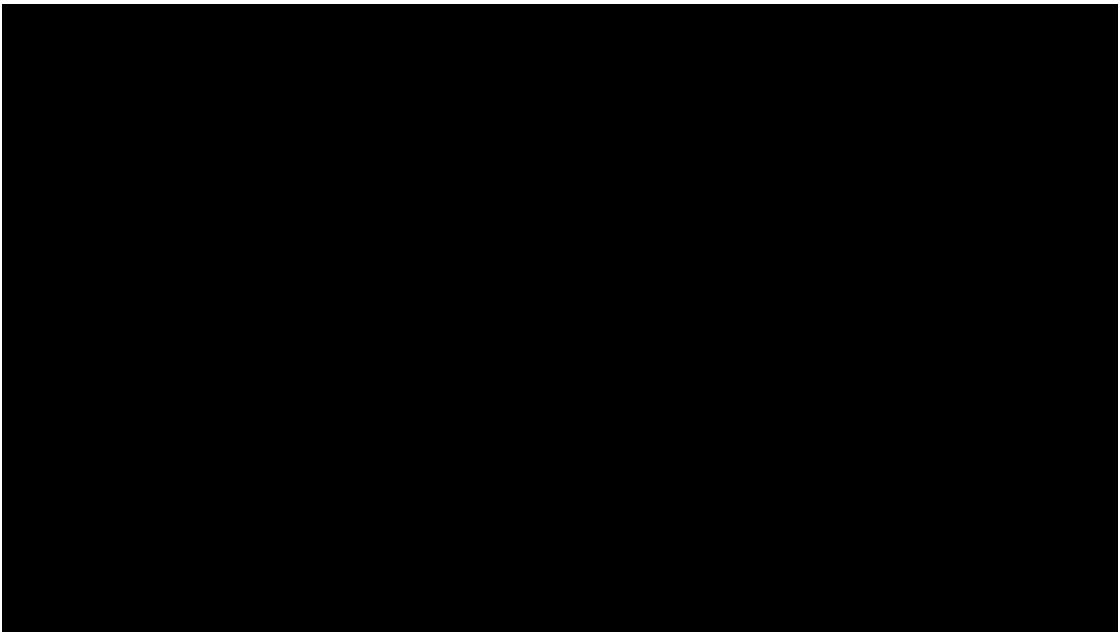
Like everyone else, I was puzzled by Cirque Du Soleil's decision to make an honest-to-goodness Broadway musical. Why not do what they did in Las Vegas? Take a space in New York City (whether on Broadway or not), renovate it to create a space suited to their work and deliver a unique, spectacle-filled show people can't see anywhere else in the world? I've seen this company's work a number of times and however so-so any particular tour, they always boast at least a few unique, eye-catching acts. At their best, they're enthralling. It worked in Vegas, so why not in New York? Besides, the worst part of any Cirque show is the music and any tepid attempts to tell a story. Why in God's name play to your weaknesses?

Well, they did anyway and the result is *Paramour*, a show that fails to deliver as a Broadway musical and -- worse -- fails to provide a good showcase for what its performers do best. Still, at two points in the show I could see glimpses of what they were going for. It made sense to me, even as I saw how short they fell of their goal. The story, such as it is, is set in old Hollywood. (It feels like the 1930s but should be the 1950s and

yet none of that matters.) Our heroine is a young woman plucked out of obscurity and quickly being turned into a star by a major Hollywood director. She is torn between the passionate demands of said director and the handsome young composer who knew her when.

This love triangle is brought to life by the three actors singing a tune about her conflicted desire. And it's embodied by three performers who stand in for the three would-be lovers. They do a trapeze act with the artist standing in for our heroine literally part of a tug of war between the "director" dangling from a trapeze and another man as the stand-in for the composer trying to pull her back to earth. She is tossed between them, with a classic trapeze act pushing the story forward, much as the dance in *Oklahoma!* retold the story of the show and set up the next scene as well. Needless to say, this trapeze act doesn't succeed artistically the way that classic ballet did. Frankly, it wasn't even very engaging as a trapeze act. (With the show set in a typical proscenium stage, the circus acts are all constrained, with the audience far too distant from them (usually, they'd be surrounding the act) and the action taking place much closer to the ground. It's still impressive on a technical level, just not nearly as eye-catching.

Even better is a chase scene at the finale. Our two young lovers are trying to escape the goons of the director and end up on the roofs of New York City. Hidden trampolines let them bounce from one roof to a water tower and then into an open window and so on. So it's a circus act posing as a chase scene and rather cleverly done. (No wonder it's the finale.) It's still dramatically inert -- rather idiotically, it begins with our duo on the street. They rush into a building and then rather than simply popping out on the roof, we spend almost five minutes watching video footage of them walking through the bowels of a building, racing up stairs and THEN popping out on the roof. Did someone think watching footage like that on monitors was going to be fun? They certainly didn't seem to need that much time to transition the sets and if they did they should have figured out something better to fill the time.



Still, you could see those two scenes and understand the idea -- create a musical and insert circus acts at key moments to push the story forward. It simply doesn't work, from the poor presentation of those acts to the fact that by and large the circus performances bring the story to a standstill rather than moving them forward.

Take the aerial act of two brothers, Andrew and Kevin Etherton. They dangle from long cords and swing out over the audience in an act one has seen many times before but which of course remains a technical challenge. But to set it up we have an elaborate scene from the film within the musical that the director is making. Our heroine is playing Cleopatra in this scene and there's a huge elaborate set, tons of extras waving feathered fans, men playing rivals for her affection and it all takes place at a stately crawl...all so one of the men can say he's making a gift of two slaves just so the brothers can do their act. Everyone on stage stops and watches, with the extras occasionally waving their fans this way and that and Cleopatra desperately trying to look engaged yet regal while watching two guys twirl through the air.

Worse are the many scenes where actors are singing and acts taking place, with each one distracting from the other. In one sadly typical display, a performer is delivering a deceptively modest act where he juggles umbrellas and then discs that seem to float down his body as he tosses them this way and that. It's an elegant, marvelous bit, one that surely takes years of practice to present in such an effortless manner. And yet what else is happening on stage? The director is in a chair, sleeping and troubled by a nightmare, tossing and turning this way and that. His image is displayed on two monitors, given wavy and psychedelic treatment so we know he's dreaming. Zombies roam the theater, chasing after various people including our young lovers. Street-lamps people the stage, strollers walk about, digital rain is falling...oh, and that talented artist is doing his routine to one side, almost entirely engulfed by the nonsense surrounding him.(Bizarrely, the elaborate program doesn't list musical numbers or the acts performed, though in this case I sussed out the artist was the talented Kyle Driggs.)

Countless other scenes are just as foolish a waste of talent and time, like the exhausting series of scenes where our heroine poses against blue screens to mimic classic movie posters like *Gone With The Wind*. Why anyone thought this was interesting or dramatic is beyond me. But then, when the big dramatic love song where our two principals declare their love is interrupted by lamp shades levitating and flying around the stage in a jaw-dropping moment of lunacy, you stop asking questions.

Amidst all this absurdity, one has to credit the three main actors. Despite a hackneyed book, horrible songs and the endless distractions all around them, they each somehow maintain our sympathies and create actual, rather appealing characters. Jeremy Kushnier is the controlling director AJ, Ruby Lewis is the appealing ingenue Indigo and Ryan Vona the handsome composer Joey. How they do it is a small miracle, perhaps the most amazing feat on display all night.

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise ***

Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2

Something Rotten ***
Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2
Broadway & The Bard * 1/2
Prodigal Son **
A Bronx Tale: The Musical **
Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **
Nice Fish ***
Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***
Hughie **
Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2
Straight ** 1/2
Eclipsed ***
Red Speedo ***
The Royale ** 1/2
Boy ****
The Robber Bridegroom ***
Hold On To Me, Darling ***
Blackbird ** 1/2
Disaster! *
The Effect ** 1/2
Dry Powder ** 1/2
Head Of Passes ** 1/2
Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2
The Crucible (w Ben Wishaw) ***
Bright Star **
She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***
Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2
RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2
RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***
RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2
Nathan The Wise ** 1/2
The Father **
American Psycho **
Waitress ** 1/2
Fully Committed ** 1/2
Long Day's Journey Into Night ***
A Streetcar Named Desire ***
Tuck Everlasting **
War **
Paramour * 1/2

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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.*