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Theater: Trump's Cabinet Of Curiosities and Dianne Wiest Up To Her Neck In "Happy Days"

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ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN? ** 1/2 out of ****

HAPPY DAYS *** 1/2 out of ****

ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN? ** 1/2 out of **** as theater but *** 1/2 for bucking up the spirits

PUBLIC THEATER AT TOWN HALL

What happened at Town Hall in New York City on Thursday night? Officially, it was a one-night, all-star glittering event — a reading/semi-staged performance of a new play by Nicolas Kent about the Senate confirmation hearings for some of President Trump's cabinet. Unofficially it was an exorcism for the fears plaguing anyone who is paying attention, a wake for democracy, a call to arms or at the very least a coming-together like the Women's March and other rallies and protests to remind those who long for the days when Presidents only lied a little that they are not alone.

Cheekily (or should I say presciently?) titled *All The President's Men?*, Kent has drawn all the dialogue from the public record, condensing and shortening (though the evening ran two hours and 45 minutes long) of course but remaining true to the substance of those hearings. Originally staged at the National Theatre in London, it has now been done at Town Hall, an appropriate venue given its political history as being founded by suffragettes.

Watching the Senate confirmation hearings on TV could be disheartening — you wanted to interrupt speakers, demand better questions and somehow slow down or stop the almost bizarre sight of men and women being put in charge of the very departments of government (Education, the EPA, etc.) they have yearned to dismantle and destroy.

Watching a condensed version of those same events on stage, however, was almost cathartic. It helped not to be sitting home alone in your bathrobe a la Trump but in a room surrounded by like-minded people and talented performers onstage. Kent's play and their performances might have gone for satire or broad clowning. Instead, they play it straight, never going for the joke even when the joke is sitting there and the

audience is chuckling along.

We get about 35 minutes each of hearings from four nominees: Rex Tillerson for Secretary of State (Alec Baldwin in fine, dissembling form), Tom Price for Health and Human Services (David Constable in an amusingly hurt tone), Scott Pruitt for the EPA (Aasif Mandvi) and Jeff Sessions for Attorney General (Nathan Osgood, oily polite). No scenes of Elizabeth DeVos for Secretary of Education? Too easy.



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Ellen Burstyn as Sen. Elizabeth Warren in "All The President's Men"

As politics, it was impeccable. As theater, it was pretty good, if long. It's a testament to how electrifying real life can be that artfully condensing something like Senate confirmation hearings can reveal character, create tension, draw out humor and more. Without hamming it up in the least, the cast was having fun. I raised an

eyebrow at Ne Yorker editor David Remnick playing Senator Al Franken. Why give up such a juicy part to a non-actor? In fact, Franken is only briefly heard here and it must be said Remnick nailed him as a role quite efficiently and was also good as Sen. Carper.

On the other hand, Ellen Burstyn's casting as Sen. Elizabeth Warren sounded deliciously spot-on and she delivered. (Someone get her a one-woman show, pronto!) Ditto Ron Rifkin as Bernie Sanders. This may be unfair to actors burdened with the blander Senators or nominees forced to say as little as possible. So yes, Rifkin and Burstyn had the funniest roles with the best lines but they still delivered on that promise. And honestly you know you're in New York City when they practically got entrance applause in an event where that was gently discouraged but in fact it wasn't even really Rifkin and Burstyn getting the applause so much as the righteous public figures they were embodying.

Pretty much everyone was a treat, from Raúl Esparza's amusingly droll Sen. Marco Rubio (even his questioning garnered some applause and appreciate comments) to Bill Irwin's puckish gravitas (if that's possible) in various parts to Denis O'Hare's wonderfully aggrieved Sen. Orrin. G. Hatch.

It ended with the Sessions session. The show didn't bother to chart the tragic ending by detailing how all four nominees ultimately took a seat in the President's Cabinet. But it did offer one final bit of catharsis via the great actor and writer Regina Taylor as Sen. Diane Feinstein. Taylor seemed to be savoring the spotlight in her aria. But then, that's precisely what Feinstein did as she gave a brief speech detailing precisely why Sen. Jeff Sessions was the last person in the world who should be named Attorney General. (Sessions was rejected during the Reagan era as too racist to be a district judge. In Alabama.)

Feinstein's comments were pointed, accurate, impossible to refute and yet everyone knew it was in many ways a pointless gesture. Perhaps this evening was too? But no, as a public event, it was smart, enlightening and a tonic. (My guest — who avoided the TV spectacle of the hearings — took comfort in knowing there were Senators asking good questions, fighting the good fight.) As theater, it needed more shape, more of a satisfying arc that one finds in similar projects like *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde*. Maybe that's wishful thinking since life was not cooperating? Or maybe we just need to wait for Kent's sequel, one that focuses on the impeachment hearings.

HAPPY DAYS *** 1/2 out of ****

THEATRE FOR A NEW AUDIENCE AT THE POLONSKY SHAKESPEARE CENTER

I'm feeling oddly fond of *Happy Days*, the formidable play by Samuel Beckett. It always seems like a burden in advance — two hours almost entirely composed of the half-mad ramblings of a woman trapped up to her waist (and then up to her neck) in a hill? Then you see it performed by a great talent like Fiona Shaw at BAM a few years ago and now Dianne Wiest a few blocks away at the Polonsky Shakespeare Center in Brooklyn. They riff on the dialogue like jazz artists, sounding an endless series of emotions like pain and regret and nostalgia and that old standby self-delusion out of a line or a word heard over and over again. And it's

effortlessly funny and sad and moving.

That “effortlessly” is misleading since Wiest makes it all look so easy. *Happy Days* is anything but. I imagine a circle of hell might include a community theater production of the play — at the very least, it seems like the sort of show a character in a Wes Anderson movie might stage for their school play. Even describing it makes the piece sound like the sort of absurdist theater that tourists imagine is done all the time in New York, preferably by self-satisfied actors in black leotards.

If you’ve never seen it, well, it’s as crazy as it sounds. A woman named Winnie is buried up to her waist in a hill. She has an umbrella and a big bag within arm’s reach. A man named Willie (presumably her husband) is nearby and sometimes seen from behind in the first act. A resounding gong wakes her up and she begins to talk. And talk. Somehow all of life’s mystery and horror are contained in what she says though damned if you can put finger on how Beckett does it.



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Dianne Wiest in “Happy Days”

The big action takes place in act two when the curtain rises and we discover the woman is now buried up to her neck. The gong gongs and again she starts to talk. And talk. The man (Jarlath Conroy) eventually appears in full and begins to crawl desperately towards her...or perhaps towards the gun right by her head?

I’ve no idea if the man played by Conroy is one of the easiest or hardest roles around — serving as the

sounding board and mostly unseen audience of our heroine. Is he consumed with half-said ideas and rejoinders? Certainly the woman Winnie is one of the most challenging and rewarding parts available. Wiest is a treat, navigating the text with ease, taking you on the almost invisible journey this person is on from daily ritual to despair and back again.

What the heck does it all mean? I do know coming out of the theater you don't really care when it has cast its spell. Still, you can't help thinking of a miserable marriage or just the absurdity of it all (or at least the absurdity of trying to figure it all out). But it's also about the joy of life, of the sad but somehow inspiring spectacle of a person soldiering on, making the best of things in a sort of stiff-upper-lip British sort of way. (In fact, I now long to see Imelda Staunton tackle this in London.) It's meaningful and meaningless; pure theater and perhaps anti-theater. In the old style.

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 w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) ***

The Antipodes **

Anastasia **

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory **

Oslo *** 1/2

The Little Foxes **

Groundhog Day ** 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O'Hara at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra **

A Doll's House, Part 2 *** 1/2

Bandstand ** 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) ***

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) **

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) ** 1/2

Rooms **

Arlington ***

All The President's Men (Public Theater one-night event at Town Hall) ** 1/2

Happy Days (w Dianne Wiest) *** 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.