



Theater: "Twelfth Night" No Treat, Precious "Children"



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

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12/14/2017 07:23 pm ET

TWELFTH NIGHT \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

THE CHILDREN \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

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CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

After recent successes with *Into The Woods* and other shows, Fiasco Theater puts coal in our stocking with a weak tea production of *Twelfth Night*. On the plus side, it features a warm scenic design courtesy of Classic Stage Company's artistic director John Doyle. The warm wood flooring is so rich, you hate to think of it being removed. The lighting by Ben Stanton is also gentle and kind, so much so you almost wish they'd gone for candlelight rather than just approximating it. Better still, Doyle's set is atypical for shows in this space — it uses the natural balcony of the far wall (where there are stairs) and houses the offstage/musicians underneath whereas most other shows put some audience members there. It's such an obvious choice one wonders why this layout isn't the default for productions at CSC. I linger over the set and the lighting and the configuration of the show because — alas — there isn't much that's positive to say about Fiasco's show itself. While it's not the best introduction to Classic Stage Company opening its space to others, better shows are sure to follow.

*Twelfth Night* is a tricky play to land. In it, two twins are separated during a terrible storm at sea and assume the other has drowned. Viola (Emily Young) decides to disguise herself as a man and offer her services to the local power that be, Orsino (Noah Brody). He is pining for Olivia (Jessie Austrian), who herself is in seclusion over the untimely death of her brother. Viola can empathize and when Orsino sends her as an emissary to profess his love, the comely lad soon wins Olivia's heart for himself. Did I mention Viola has grown quite fond of Orsino herself? So Viola is in love with Orsino who is in love with Olivia who is in love with Viola in her disguise as a young man. Meanwhile, our heroine's identical twin brother has washed ashore and will soon complicate these matters of the heart further.

A tiresome subplot involves Olivia's household. Sir Toby Belch (Andy Grotelueschen) is carousing at all hours while leading the hapless Sir Andrew into believing that Olivia will fall for his non-existent charms. This drives the servant Maria (Tina Chilip) to distraction, though she fancies Sir Toby and it drives the dour, stick in the

mud Malvolio quite mad with anger. Sir Toby and his friends get into all sorts of mischief, sending Sir Andrew to duel with Viola and tricking Malvolio into believing Olivia is actually in love with him. When done right (by Mark Rylance or by Bedlam, most recently), the taunting of Malvolio recedes into the background or seems more playful than cruel. When done poorly, the treatment of Malvolio becomes positively cruel or — worse — tiresome. Here it is very tiresome.



PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

Sadly, that is true of everything else. Co-directors Noah Brody and Ben Steinfeld proffer up a vague, nautical frame for this story. The cast begins with a sea chanty of sorts and break into song throughout. The consists of trunks you might use on a voyage and a piano is draped with fish netting and a wooden ship's wheel. But this adds nothing to the story after a promising first few minutes.

Much of the cast feels uncomfortable with the language, with the twins especially lacking. Young is often hard to hear and rarely makes sense of the dialogue and Javier Ignacio as Sebastian fares little better. Since Viola is the heart of the story, this is a flaw the show cannot overcome. Since it's the holidays, I'll suggest this may simply be the result of an unfocused production. Jessie Austrian fares better...until any actual believability is tossed out the window and she's asked to prance around like a fool. Grotelueschen is comfortable holding court as Sir Toby and perhaps with the show floundering one can forgive his playing to the crowd. Chilip and David Samuel as Sebastian's friend Antonio are solid with what little they have to do.

But all is not lost. Even in an uninteresting production of *Twelfth Night* that squanders one of Shakespeare's

great female parts and adds nothing new to the story, a pleasure can be found. And that's in the charming, commanding, utterly winning performance of co-director Steinfeld as the Fool Feste. He sings, he plays guitar, he trades quips and insults and insights with grace and subtlety. So often the Fool is the wisest person in the room. Here he is also the winningest.

THE CHILDREN \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB AT THE SAMUEL J. FRIEDMAN THEATRE

The floor is...askew. It is tilted, out of joint, *wrong*. The entire set of *The Children* is a little off-balance, just enough to tug at your brain again and again as you are quietly reminded that something, everything is subtly wrong. Yes, people can keep their balance, chairs stay mostly on the floor, it's not a complete disaster, but still. Water that spills will roll down like a river and if you drop an apple it will roll and roll and roll.

This is not a symbolic tilting, not exactly. In this new play by Lucy Kirkwood, we hear casual, if weighted references to some sort of disaster. Worse than an apocalyptic nightmare, in a way, is the truth: it's just a tragic, local disaster in the UK. Some sort of fault-line and a local nuclear power plant and backup generators that were stupidly placed *in the basement!* have compounded bad luck and stupidity and created a nightmare scenario. Think what it must be like to live near the Fukushima nuclear disaster and you have the unpleasantly realistic scenario for *The Children*.

Hazel (Deborah Findlay) and Robin (Ron Cook) live in a cottage near the plant, far enough away to be "safe" but close enough so Robin can return daily to their original home and tend to the cows that are trapped there. Electricity is spotty, the toilets are dodgy, food is a bit of a struggle but of course they carry on. Hazel and Robin aren't locals overwhelmed by the disaster — they are highly trained scientists who actually worked there. When a coworker named Rose (Francesca Annis) pops in out of the blue, inevitably old tensions and old stories surface — radioactive isotopes have nothing on old flames.

But what have I done? I've sort of described a vague plot outline (old friend of a long-married couple shows up and trouble is a-brewing). Yet I've failed entirely to capture the spirit of this pitch-perfect production. It's a very good play with very good performances and a very good production design and very good direction, all working together to give you that delicious feeling of being in very good hands from start to finish. The second it begins, you are absorbed and delighted and relieved — this will be a good night of theater.

And indeed it is. The titled box of a set — the play is set entirely in kitchen of that ramshackle cottage — immediately holds your attention. At the beginning and the end we hear the sound of the ocean and sense the mysterious power of nature all around them. The three actors couldn't be in more sync if they were a string quartet that had spent a lifetime perfecting their focus and interplay.

*The Children* — directed by James Macdonald — is smaller and more heart-rendingly believable than some end of the world scenario. That makes the (inevitable) moral choice Hazel and Robin must confront all the more piercing. Yes, in this case it involves exposing oneself to deadly radiation so the young folk working the plant and trying to contain the disaster can be spared to live a longer, fuller life.

But of course it's really the question all parents, all older people face as they must sacrifice or simply get out of the way of the young. Hazel and Robin have a daughter who is helpless, really. But if Hazel stops holding their 38 year old daughter's hand will that mean the young woman flounders and slips under for good or finally be forced to handle things on her own, however sloppily? And don't they need to give her the chance to find out one way or another? Do it for the children, they say. But do what? Sacrifice? Interfere? Step aside? Give up? Give way? How easy and hard it is to know the right thing to do.

And how easy all involved make a fresh, compelling drama like this seem. It isn't, but when all the elements are in place — the right actors, the right play, the right director and the right creative team to bring it to life — a fusion reaction begins and it gives off heat and light for a long, long time.

## **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 \*\*

War Paint \*\*

In and Of Itself \*\*\*

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

Derren Brown: Secret \*\*\* 1/2

The Whirligig \* 1/2

Sojourners and Her Portmanteau \*\*

Broadway By The Year 1997-2006 \*\*\*

The Boy Who Danced On Air \*\* 1/2

The Government Inspector \*\* 1/2

A Doll's House, Part 2 (with Julie White and Stephen McKinley Henderson) \*\*\*

Desperate Measures \*\*\*

The Honeymooners \*\*

People, Places & Things \*\*

M. Butterfly \* 1/2

Red Roses, Green Gold no stars

Of Thee I Sing (MasterVoices concert presentation at Carnegie Hall) \*\* 1/2

The Band's Visit (Broadway) \*\*\* 1/2

Junk \*\*

Actually \*\*

Harry Clarke \*\* 1/2

Bedlam's Peter Pan \* 1/2

Home For The Holidays \*

Describe The Night \*\*

Pride and Prejudice \*\*\*

The Parisian Woman \*

Once On This Island \*\*

SpongeBob SquarePants: The Broadway Musical \*\* 1/2

It's A Wonderful Life: The Live Radio Play \*\*\*

Twelfth Night (At CSC) \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

The Children \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

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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.***