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Theater: Two Earnest, Exhausting Plays Spin Their Wheels

05/22/2017 12:34 am ET | Updated May 22, 2017

THE WHIRLIGIG * 1/2 out of ****

SOJOURNERS & HER PORTMANTEAU ** out of ****

Seeing two plays two days in a row sometimes brings out similarities (or in this case problems). Both plays offer some engaging dialogue and show the writers have a certain promise. Both circle around mysteries — in one, why did a teenage girl become a drug addict/get sick and in the other, how could a mother give up her newborn daughter to a feckless husband? But both do it by simply revealing information to us that individual characters already know. It's a classic case of telling instead of showing. Both have problematic set designs because when a show is confused often the set becomes confused as well. In *The Whirligig*, the cast flails around trying to bring the story to life, making things worse. In *Sojourners*, the cast (mostly) rises above the material. Both are earnest to a fault. Both are exhausting, despite the talent involved. Both leave you frustrated.

THE WHIRLIGIG * 1/2 out of ****

THE NEW GROUP AT SIGNATURE THEATRE

Playwright Hamish Linklater is a marvelous actor who sparkles in everything from Shakespeare to the TV series *Legion*. His generosity of spirit perhaps leads him astray here as a writer — Linklater sets aside meaty scenes for every single actor, however dramatically unnecessary they may be. And it all builds to a noisy, hard to swallow climax where the characters are brought together, aliases unmasked and forgiveness is on tap. Like a whirligig, it spins and spins but your attention soon wanders.

A young woman named Julie (Grace Van Patten) is dying and her family and friends guiltily wonder who to blame. God, we assume, but no, they have more earthly burdens to shoulder. Should her dad Michael (Norbert Leo Butz, in unfortunate overdrive) blame his genes and his own struggles with addiction? Should her mom (Dolly Wells) be fingered for leaving them both when Michael's alcoholism became too much and leaving Julie behind, even though Julie seems to have always sided with him anyway? What about her best friend Trish (Zosia Mamet) for introducing Julie to shooting up and thus the hep c that is now killing her? Or her drug

dealer turned doctor, who just happens to be overseeing her care? Or his brother, who briefly dated Julie after meeting her on a heroin delivery he performed for his sibling.

All these connections are tiresomely teased out over a long, two and a half hour play. But it's not a terribly compelling mystery since Julie herself goes from noble sufferer back to typical bored teenager. We never really see her become the drug addict in between, though one scene does see her jump from seemingly curious about heroin to a character straight out of *Panic In Needle Park* at dizzying speed. Her dad's an annoying drunk, her mom leaves him, she's a teen with some serious attitude towards mom (which seems wholly unearned) and the idea of someone to blame for this pretty standard scenario just feels far-fetched. It's not even clear if Julie became a full-on junkie or just had some bad luck by sharing a needle one time. Is she a problem to be solved or a person who just got sick, however one wants someone to blame for illness?

The big problem is that we just don't really care. Moment to moment, Linklater can write some distinctive, intelligent dialogue. Structurally, however, the play is a mess. One scene follows another but one scene doesn't lead to another. Every character has their moment in the sun, to a fault. A drunk in a bar (nicely assayed by John DeVries) serves no purpose, especially when dragged into the middle of the finale. We spend a lengthy scene watching Michael rehearse a bad actor for the role of Prospero; despite a fight between them it offers absolutely nothing to the story that we don't already know. Indeed, the next scene — in which Michael is lying drunk on the back lawn when a drug dealer shows up — would have had more interest starting out without us knowing why Michael is out there (or wondering WHY he would cast a bad actor in the most important role in *The Tempest*).

Shorter is not better, necessarily, but if you cut away the extraneous scenes and characters you can start to figure out what the story is actually about rather than simply what comes next. And when it comes to pruning, the bizarre set design of Derek McLane would be a good place to start. It includes windows against the back wall, though whether we're looking at a home or apartment building or what, I'm not sure. Trees stick out over the set from both sides of the stage as if growing sideways; these raise and lower, seemingly at random. Characters sometimes climb the trees but are then seen sitting on the trunk, kind of defying gravity. A tree laboriously lowers so Trish can climb into it, which she does with some difficulty. Once perched on the trunk, then and only then does she ask for help from the guy already in the tree, god knows why. The trees are visible pretty much all the way through, whether we're in a hospital or bar or in a bedroom and the effect is simply odd. We aren't put off-kilter by the trees; just annoyed.

While I know people do boneheaded things all the time, I was especially annoyed by the teenage girls having their heroin dealer make a delivery by coming to their house the back way. Julie's mom and dad are both home, as is Trish's boyfriend, who objects to her doing any drugs at all. In other words, the house is simply crawling with people who would disapprove (naturally) of a drug buy and yet instead of just meeting the guy somewhere else or simply not scheduling a drop at Julie's house when everyone is home seems not to occur. Ok, some people would do this I guess, but these two young women did not seem quite that moronic.

Not that it mattered. Julie's drunken dad can't put two and two together and her mom is happy to hand over some cash for Julie to traipse off to the movies with this 23 year old guy neither parent has met before. Indeed, the flirtatious scene between the two is the show's highlight and a good reason why Linklater needs to write a lot more and learn a lot more about structure and what matters and being merciless to characters so he can write something good some day. Their scene climaxes by reading a poem bursting with angst that includes a list of everyone Julie loves, in which she already nastily includes virtually everyone *except* her mom.

This seemingly ne'er do well guy (who actually takes the fall for his brother down the road, in yet another example of the play's information overload) begs her to include her mom in that expansive list. Jonny Orsini is very appealing here and wins over the girl to balance out the karma of the universe. A better playwright would have saved that awkward but sincere poem maybe to end the show, if he thought it was good enough. Instead, Linklater delivers it here and then only teases a reprise, even though the irony of this loving gesture (which the dying daughter didn't really feel) was just what the finale needs. Instead, the show offers a Shakespearean flurry of revelations and an overarching kindness which we can't accept until it stumbles to a stop and the audience isn't even sure if it's over. An original song by the show's composer Duncan Sheik kicks in to cue the applause and his plangent voice is always welcome. But that's a cheat; the wind simply petered out and the whirligig slowed and slowed and then stopped but by then we'd looked away.

SOJOURNERS & HER PORTMANTEAU ** out of ****

NEW YORK THEATRE WORKSHOP

These dramas are just two parts of a nine-play cycle by Mfoniso Udofia about a Nigerian matriarch and her

extended family. *Sojourners* takes place in Texas in the late 1970s; *Her Portmanteau* takes place in New York City some thirty years later. It may seem strange to say, but a story of Nigerian immigrants struggling to adjust to life in 1970s Texas feels very familiar. Abasiama (an excellent Chinasa Ogbuagu) is very pregnant and very industrious. She's holding down a job at a gas station while studying biology and preparing to have her first child. Her charming but undependable husband Ukpong (Hubert Point-Du Jour, very appealing) disappears for days or weeks at a time, reads porn, skips his studies and spends the money she earns buying Motown records as "gifts" for his wife that are really for him. Still, he's funny and sexy and charming — we can see he's no good but we can also see why she fell for him in the first place.

We also see a far more studious Nigerian named Disciple (Chinaza Uche) studying away in isolation (when not praying to Jesus) and Abasiama's interactions with the prototypical hooker with a heart of gold, a hot mess called Moxie (Lakisha Michelle May, chewing up every bit of scenery in sight). When the baby comes and other crises come to a head, Abasiama must choose: return to Nigeria with her husband, having failed; become roomies with this hooker who means well but probably can't be depended on; or divorce and then marry Disciple, who is strange as only the recently converted can be but offers all the dull stability she lacks. Oh, and what to do with the child?



PHOTO COPYRIGHT 2017 BY JOAN MARCUS

Hubert Point-Du Jour and Chinasa Ogbuagu in "Sojourners."

Anyone who glances at the cast list for *Her Portmanteau* taking place thirty years later will face quite a few spoilers.

(SPOILER ALERT FOR SECOND PLAY)

We can see Abasiama married Disciple and has had at least one daughter with him. And very quickly we realize the daughter she gave up in the first play is coming from Nigeria, perhaps to live for good? *Sojourners* outgrew its welcome but *Her Portmanteau* is far more tiresome and makes one like the first play less in retrospect. First, Ogbuaga was such a pillar in the first play, it's distressing to see her play her own American daughter named Adiagha and give the least satisfying performance in the second. The contrast between the two characters is fun but Ogbuaga struggled with some lines even at this performance after opening night and the role is simply irritating.

Everyone in it behaves foolishly. The daughter our heroine gave up is coming from Nigeria, her first time on a plane. It seems she's coming to stay. (Though even this and the logistics of when her six year old son will be joining her are a little opaque.) So this woman named Iniabasi is seeing her mother for the first time in decades (or ever, perhaps) and expects to be flying to Boston to live in a big house. Instead, her plane ride ends in New York City and she's picked up not by the woman who abandoned her 30 years ago but by that woman's daughter, the very person who has enjoyed the attention and love denied her.

So she's halfway across the world in a strange city, the *wrong* city and staying in a cramped apartment while the mother who ignored her for years finally shows up and yet the American daughter complains how she didn't say a word on the ride home from the airport. Um, yeah, I think all that might make someone prickly! How can she not understand that? And how does the American daughter Adiagha NOT remember a trip to Africa to see her long-lost sister and all those relatives in Nigeria? Sure, she was only eight years old, but really?

The miscommunication and hurt feelings and need to dredge up decades of resentment grows very tiresome very quickly, with no character making much sense or showing much empathy for anyone else. As the abandoned child, Adepero Oduye is commanding and vivid, by far the most successful at creating a complete and believable person. But they're saddled with forced confrontations, all within the space of two hours, and we simply don't buy it. Most of it depends on repeating things we already know (how could you give me up??) and so it doesn't even offer the soap-like tease of new information.

We know the answers, though it does seem a surprise that Disciple has gone from a religious convert to a nut-job. Even still, we're confused — if the mother was turned down by him decades ago when she wanted to reclaim her daughter, why did she think anything would be different now? His refusal again is why they had to change plans at the last minute; though why she imagined for a second she should invite her daughter and grandchild to come live in Boston for good and paid for a plane ticket before actually having her husband's agreement, is bizarre.

Suddenly, playwright Udofia has undercut her own characters. A woman who chose thirty years ago what she saw as the only path forward — by sending her newborn daughter back home, hopefully to a family

“compound” where the child would be looked after by an extended family — now seems kind of thoughtless. Has she really toyed with this person’s affections yet again by recklessly promising to finally offer a home when she had no way to do so? A woman who made a bitter, difficult choice in the first play now seems a little feckless herself.

It’s all directed rather poorly by Ed Sylvanus Iskandar, who allows overacting in the first play, some dreadful staging (especially in the second play) and a bizarre scenic design choice by Jason Sherwood. The stage includes a revolving turntable used throughout the first play to move us from the home of the young couple to her job at the gas station and eventually the hospital (among other sets).

Looming over it all in both shows is a huge wooden structure that includes lights along the frame and giant screens that mostly seem like big window panes. It gives a vaguely post-modern or even sci-fi aspect to the set before the show starts. Once the play begins, it’s pretty nondescript, offering up one visual pattern when they’re home, another at the hospital and so on. Yet it’s so big, so overwhelming visually that you can never quite escape its shadow. And it serves no purpose. You could remove it completely and the show wouldn’t miss it in the least. But there it remains, sapping away your attention.

Another problem arises from the period songs sprinkled throughout the show. Before it begins, we hear a string of country songs by female artists. Combine that with the odd set and we were happily led to expect an unexpected take on new arrivals in America. But then comes Dolly Parton’s cross-over hit from 1977 “Here You Come Again,” a song about a woman trying to make it on her own but seduced yet one more time by a no-good guy who can charm her in the blink of an eye. It proves way too nail-on-the-head for the story we’re about to see, which is about a woman who indeed must deal with that very dilemma. Then comes a parade of r&b hits, reflecting the taste of the husband, which makes less and less sense since this is her story. And then, just to underline the obvious, the final devastating break-up is staged to the music of Fleetwood Mac’s “The Chain,” their classic breakup tune from the most successful breakup album of all time, *Rumours*. It’s as if the playwright doesn’t trust us to know what to feel. But at least the two bookends were songs that dominated the popular imagination in 1977. In the second play, they play more songs, but they’re still basically r&b tunes from the 1970s. *Her Portmanteau* ends with “Lovely Day” by Bill Withers, a great track by a great artist...that came out in 1977. Though the entire point of the second play is to heal wounds and move forward, the music is still stuck in the past.

But the most confusing flourish comes at the end of *Sojourners*. Abasiama has just made the dreadful choice to stay in America and send her daughter back home with her husband. She can’t imagine being able to finish her studies with the child needing full-time care and she can’t imagine coming so far only to fail. And so she makes this painful decision and the play ends and the cast bows and then — oddly — sort of turn and watch each other as each bows and then leaves the stage.

Suddenly, the play sort of begins again and we’re given a tableaux. It turns out to be the last family portrait (a penny that doesn’t drop until the end of the second play) but in fact it just leaves us confused — after seeing the woman walk away, the show ends with husband and wife seemingly reunited with their child. Has she

changed her mind? Has she returned to Africa? Has he returned to America? No, it's just yet another bad choice, from a couch that is comically overloaded with secrets (beer bottles, numerous presents, pornography AND bad academic news) to a set dominated by an unnecessary visual monolith to characters who have trouble speaking plainly to each other in any language.

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 **

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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.