

Theater: Unshocking 'Side Show,' Exhausting 'Tamburlaine'

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SIDE SHOW ** out of ****

TAMBURLAINE PARTS 1 AND 2 ** 1/2 out of ****

STRAIGHT WHITE MEN ** out of ****

THE ERLKINGS * 1/2 out of ****

SIDE SHOW ** out of ****

ST. JAMES THEATRE

The story of the Hilton twins is a British horror story -- not because they were born as conjoined twins, but because of how cruelly the world treated them, from the mother who sold them to the midwife who bought them to the many people who abused and used them throughout their lives. Just reading [their entry on Wikipedia](#) is depressing, right down to the sad, sad finale. Surely a less obvious idea for a Broadway musical has never existed. Yet Side Show in 1997 was a Broadway baby's delight, with its cult status after closing in about eleven weeks to song after song that celebrates the freaks, the outsiders, the people who are scorned but want or need or do believe they are special and talented and unique. It powered the careers of Alice Ripley and Emily Skinner. And now it's back.

Oscar-winning director Bill Condon is making his Broadway debut with this revival that received acclaim out of town. One can understand the appeal: it has a pretty solid score that's akin to a happier Wicked, with two sisters who get to set off vocal fireworks in song after song where they establish their own identities but insist they'll always have each other. The book and lyrics are by Bill Russell and the much better music is by Henry Krieger, who did the music for the wonderful Dreamgirls. Side Show might work commercially now. But it certainly doesn't work artistically. The show has a banally straightforward presentation of the freaks, unimaginative settings, very modest drama at its heart and a central conceit that simply never convinces.

It begins like so many shows before with an emcee/carnival barker named Sir (the oily, ok Robert Joy) greeting the audience. In this case, he's urging us to check out the side show where you'll meet all sorts of freaks: a cannibal, a dog boy, a bearded lady, a geek and so on, all topped of course by the main attraction: the Hilton twins Violet (Erin Davie) and Daisy (Emily Padgett), two sisters literally joined at the hip.

They're miserable people but the freaks around them provide a family of sorts, led by their friend and protector Jake (David St. Louis), who is obviously in love with the sweet Violet. He's soon shunted aside by Terry (Ryan Silverman), a down on his luck theatrical whiz and Terry's talented gay friend Buddy (Matthew Hydzik). Terry thinks the girls have potential and he and Buddy whisk them away to vaudeville with a whole new act built around their unique situation.

Daisy is thrilled -- she longs for the spotlight and the flirty, smooth-talking and handsome Terry. Violet is game though she really just wants to be normal...and has fallen for the kind-hearted Buddy since Violet seems to be the only person on the planet unaware he's gay. Feeling sorry for her, Buddy proposes marriage and their soaring popularity reaches a peak with a carnival-like nuptial that will make headlines around the world. But how can it work?

The problems are many but the score is not particularly one of them. The show apparently has many new and reworked numbers and they're all sturdy, catchy pieces, if not always well placed. It's more the staging and lack of theatrical magic that lets this thin story down. The sideshow is predictably a murky, dark and unappealing world. But the switch to glitz and glamor barely registers here in the production design by Davide Rockwell and the (better) costumes by Paul Tazewell.

A big stadium setting for the wedding is barely indicated by a slide projection of a big top against the back wall. The girls do get snazzier costumes as they're groomed for success. But in a truly bizarre number, their big breakthrough has them looking period-perfect while their male backup singers have ridiculous sparkly vests and sparkly red bow-ties and sparkly red armbands that are straight out of the 1970s Bob Mackie tool kit. They are jarringly out of sync with the time period.

At the show's lowest point in the first act, a lengthy and entirely unnecessary flashback sequence details the cruel treatment the Hiltons received from birth. It adds absolutely nothing dramatically -- we already know their stepfather and guardian is a vicious and cruel man. In the middle of it, they shoehorn in the magician Houdini (Javier Ignacio) and give him a number called "All In The Mind." Apparently, in real life it was hyped in the press that he taught the girls self-hypnosis so they could give each other some alone time. Watching the show, you have literally no idea what he's singing about. In a laughably inept moment, at the end of the song Houdini fades into the background by stepping backwards out of the spotlight and tosses a handful of confetti or something in the air for a magical "effect." As a joke about lame magicians, it would have played well on The Carol Burnett Show. As an intended serious moment in a Broadway show, it's jaw-droppingly bad.

Though Terry has been nothing but a bland flirt and we assume he's bedding other women every night, in Act Two his big number is the dramatic "Private Conversation" in which Terry is torn by his passionate desire for Daisy. Two problems. That song is almost immediately followed by Jake's long-overdue admission that he's passionate for Violet. Having two very similar numbers performed so close to each other lessens the impact of both. Plus, the groundwork for Terry's tortured emotions hasn't been laid in the least while Jake's pronouncement of love was long overdue, throwing them both off in another sense. The other problem? Terry is revealed at the finale to secretly consider the girls to be, you know, freaks. So is he passionately in love with a freak? Disgusted by his passion? Not really in love with her at all and if so then what was he singing so dramatically about? "Private Conversation" is a pure statement of desire, not the twisted and far more interesting jumble of emotions a better song might have been. Instead, it's an unconvincing confession that sideswipes us and is soon undermined by his real ("realer"?) feelings.

By and large, very little is at stake dramatically. We know Violet and Buddy don't belong together, so seeing them break up is hardly wrenching. And we never thought Terry cared for Daisy so the pronouncement of love followed quickly by disgust hardly registers either. Silverman and Hydzik are appealing enough but their characters are so paper thin they can't really register. St. Louis gets the warmest applause of the night thanks to his commanding voice and the fact that Jake is the only decent person on stage for most of the show besides the Hilton sisters.

And yet, putting all that aside the real and tragic problem with Side Show is that I never for a single moment thought I was seeing conjoined twins, two individual sisters with passions and desires of their own who were also connected in every possible way to each other. They merely seemed like two women who just happened to be standing very close to each other. I don't know why. Having heard repeatedly about the magical symbiotic performances of Ripley and Skinner, I was eagerly looking forward to what Davie and Padgett would do. They are good and sing with precision and passion on the big numbers "Who Will Love Me As I Am?" and "I Will Never Leave You." I just never felt they were very well connected.

TAMBURLAINE PARTS 1 AND 2 ** 1/2 out of ****

THEATRE FOR A NEW AUDIENCE

Thank god for the great John Douglas Thompson. He is surely the only reason this elaborate presentation of the lengthy and rarely seen and ultimately exhausting Tamburlaine was staged in the first place. And his commanding, electric presence is the only reason the evening ultimately has value. It was fascinating to see Christopher Marlowe's work though one might have easily wished they had stopped with Part 1.

This bloody tale of a real-life conqueror of the world akin to Napoleon, Alexander The Great and Genghis Khan originally ended with Tamburlaine having conquered everyone in sight and finally deciding he'd accomplished enough to be worthy of marrying his beloved Zenocrate. He had many titles and many lands under his domain, quite an accomplishment for a "shepherd" who had proved a brilliant and ruthless leader of men in combat, winning over some worthy opponents and simply out-smarting and out-slaughtering the rest.

That's the gist of what became known as Part 1, a play so popular that Marlowe happily produced a sequel. I was reminded of The Sopranos. Just as that show's creator was a bit taken aback by how audiences embraced a brutal mobster, it feels as if Marlowe decided, oh, you like Tamburlaine? I'll give you Tamburlaine. For Part 2 descends into Grand Guignol, complete with captive kings being chained and bridled like horses and forced to haul around Tamburlaine in a chariot.

His bloodiness knows no bounds in Part 2 and Tamburlaine -- moved in part by grief over the death of his wife -- first stabs to death one son for being a coward, then kills every man and woman and child in a town that refuses to surrender and finally mocks the heavens by declaring himself a god and burning copies of the Koran. (Some have suggested the show is anti-Muslim, which is bizarre to say the least. Christians prove feckless and won't keep their sworn word. Tamburlaine is a self-aggrandizing heretic. Only Muslims keep their word and behave with any honor. If anything, it's pro-Muslim and the man who mocks their faith is immediately punished.) It's a bloody and ultimately rather repetitive evening of battle.

At the end of Part 1, you don't have a satisfying dramatic character of depth. But Marlowe's writing is electric and vivid from moment to moment. It's just that most scenes involve one ruler boasting about how he'll crush his opponent and then the other says actually he'll be the one to triumph and then the winner (always Tamburlaine) boasts again. It never comes close to the depth and nuance of Shakespeare's best (or even minor Shakespeare).

But Thompson brings his remarkable skills to bear and humanizes this warrior. The staging by Michael Boyd is fluid enough but the reasonable decision to have many actors play multiple parts adds to the repetitive nature of the evening. Actors play rulers who are crushed in battle by Tamburlaine and killed, only to rise again and become yet another bull-headed ruler who tries to defy this upstart only to be crushed and killed again.

The attempts to add levity -- primarily by the strained work of Paul Lazar as foolish kings and a timid jailor -- is understandable but probably fruitless and counter-productive. Tamburlaine's sidekicks are appealing and come off best, with Andrew Hovelson and especially Keith Randolph Smith bringing warmth and complexity to their parts. Merritt Janson has fun doubling as the beautiful Zenocrate and later Callapine. But many others simply declaim the lengthy oratory of their various roles and come and go, with the exception of Zachary Infante offering a haughty and naughty Prince Joffrey-like glee to the son of Tamburlaine who has obviously inherited all his dad's cruelty and none of his genius.

But truly, Part 2 feels so much like more and more of the same to less and less impact. It doesn't help that real life provided a rather deflating finale. Just as in the ending to War Of The Worlds, the mighty Tamburlaine proved unstoppable in battle but could be stopped by disease. Shakespeare would later make more of such a downfall but Marlowe's skills weren't at that level yet. Luckily, Thompson's skills are and you're glad to see him bring this to life while equally eager to see him tackle so many other roles in the canon of not just classical theater but any great role. I for one can't wait to see him in everything from King Lear to August Wilson.

Director Boyd does oversee the evening with staging that keeps the martial antics from wearing out their

welcome about as long as possible, with actors positioned everywhere throughout the theater at one point or another. One could wish his role as editor of the plays had been far more aggressive. And strong applause for percussionist Arthur Solari whose work was excelled only by Thompson. He performed a memorable score of his own devising that was another reason this Tamburlaine was as watchable as it proved.

STRAIGHT WHITE MEN ** out of ****

PUBLIC THEATER

Young Jean Lee is one of the most interesting theatrical talents around. But her new play isn't remotely ready for staging yet. It's dramatically inert and has a puzzle at its core that the show is incapable of addressing or even illuminating in some interesting manner. No surer sign of a show not being "ready" exists than the baffled quiet of an audience when a show is over. A reading would have been kinder for this piece, though whether there is something worth excavating is another matter.

It has a promising start. A widowed father and his three adult sons are gathered together for the holidays. One scene takes place on Christmas Eve, the next on Christmas Day and the finale on the day after Christmas. Middle son Jake (Gary Wilmes) is playing a video game and youngest son Drew (Pete Simpson) is quietly watching and then inevitably decides to annoy his brother. Their camaraderie is palpable and kudos to the casting of Jordan Thaler and Heidi Griffiths: the three brothers genuinely look like brothers while also being distinct. If Austin Pendleton doesn't quite seem to be their dad, hasn't every parent and child wondered briefly how this one came from that one?

They banter, they joke, they pull out a mocked-up game of Monopoly the family once dubbed "Privilege" and the situation becomes clear. These straight white men were raised in a very socially conscious home and something isn't quite right. Youngest Drew has become a social critic and college professor. Jake has presumably rebelled by working in finance and being the most atypical of the three (he can play along but is clearly more of a frat boy when away from his family). And the oldest son Matt (James Stanley) is living at home, not so much to keep an eye on their elderly father but because he's a lost soul filled with pain and fading potential.

That is it, unfortunately. Matt breaks down in tears at the end of the first scene. We then spend a lot of time debating whether one is being intrusive or helpful to try to get Matt to actually talk about what's bothering him. Jake announces the most positive spin on things: Matt is just rebelling against the world and realizes that as a straight white male he can't really fix the world because he is ineluctably part of the problem. So he's doing nothing! It's the only truly progressive stance he can take. Malarkey says Drew; Matt is in pain and shouldn't be wasting his days as a part-time volunteer for noble organizations where his brilliant mind is wasted working the copier. Yes, someone needs to work the copier but surely Matt could do something more useful. Dad just wants them to have a happy time.

Matt of course is the inarticulate center of attention. He convincingly insists that Jake has it all wrong but he won't open up to his little brother either. The lack of forward momentum in Lee's play begins to reveal itself. Easy short-hand for a life lived together includes in-jokes or secret handshakes and the like. But this family piles them on with in-joke followed by comedy routine followed by group dancing that's clearly an echo of days gone by and on and on until they've made so many self-referential jokes you'd think this was Monty Python with decades of skits under their belt instead of a normal family.

Worse, Lee clearly has no idea exactly what is plaguing Matt and certainly isn't looking to make any inertia or ineluctable angst of the straight white male the mysterious center of something else. It's just a puzzle and not a very interesting puzzle with absolutely no resolution. As the two best-defined characters, Wilmes and Simpson come off the best here. Stanley can't bring the murky Matt to life, though happily Lee never makes him a symbol of straight white male angst. Unfortunately, she doesn't make him a full-blooded character either.

Pendleton struggled repeatedly with his lines on the performance I caught, though his familiar Jimmy Stewart-

like cadence allowed him to smooth over the stumbling. That is, until a climactic scene where unfortunately his stumbles spread to the others like one domino toppling over the others. It was a scene where some potential drama arose as Matt's attempt to rehearse for a job interview began in a halting, tentative sort of way to reveal his deep-rooted insecurity and feelings of exceptionally low self-esteem.

Just as you hoped something would come into focus things fell apart. After rather calmly insisting for days that Jake was wrong, he sort of seems to indicate Jake is maybe right, though not in a way that was actually interesting. Adding to the confusion, all three of the other characters betrayed everything we knew about them to create some false drama, from a physical assault to a sudden revelation that one brother fears the others think he's stupid to the father's cold rejection of Matt in a way that makes absolutely no sense. The play stopped and the audience responded with silence. Not the stunned silence of an audience a playwright hopes for but the uncertain silence of an audience that a playwright has baffled.

THE ERLKINGS * 1/2 out of ****

BECKETT THEATRE AT THEATRE ROW

Mass shootings are not limited to the US but they do seem to haunt the nation. Surely this one will be the last you think, until the next one occurs. They begin to blend one into another, unless of course you are directly affected and then they never blur, never lose their awful power. Columbine once loomed large in the national conversation, a 1999 school shooting where two teenagers lashed out in violence, killing a dozen students, one teacher, injuring dozens more and then committing suicide. It was horrific in its intensity and terrible planned mayhem, complete with home movies and the spectre of video games and school bullying and easy access to weapons and countless other "explanations" of why and how such a terrible thing happened. Now, sadly, we have simply substituted "Sandy Hook" for "Columbine" and ten years from now some other, fresher tragedy will be the name to comes to mind.

Playwright Nathaniel Sam Shapiro was only nine when Columbine happened but he's tackling the events leading up to that massacre in his first play The Erlkings. The title is taken from a poem by Goethe which is about a son who warns his father there's a terrible evil stalking them but is ignored until it's too late. Eric Harris, the more dominant of the duo that planned and executed the Columbine attack, made a note to himself in one school planner to memorize it.

This is typical of Shapiro's earnest, but misguided play. Though there's no particular indication (at least here) that Eric strongly identified with the poem, it's given huge import in this show. Shapiro wants to listen to these two, without necessarily empathizing and certainly not by excusing their actions. Why close our eyes to their actions if we can perhaps learn something by studying who they are? It's too easy to just dismiss them as monsters, he says. But that leads him to their poems and amateur home movies, to their school papers and diaries, all of which he quotes from indiscriminately. Just because they committed such horrors doesn't mean their adolescent ramblings have suddenly taken on artistic interest. Those jottings would be of interest to a psychiatrist but don't especially interest us.

Scene after scene involves maybe some dramatized moment such as science lab followed by a teacher announcing "Eric's diary" or "Dylan's poem" or school paper or some such thing, followed by the actor in that role reciting a selection from said piece. But these thoughts amount to nothing of interest. Life sucks. School sucks. Everyone sucks. And so on. Their home movies -- silly imitations of horror and post-apocalyptic flicks -- may have some creepy echo of what they would soon do. But watching them rehearse and shoot badly written scenes isn't involving, even if we see bloopers and outtakes. Neither is watching Dylan beta test Eric's attempt to create a video game and offering his critique.

And diving into their psyche, telling their story, inevitably raises the complex issue of "why." Why did they do what they did? Was it bullying? Was it some issue of sexual impotence hinted at in a scene where Eric goes on

a date? Was Dylan perhaps gay or curious? Is it the absent parents or authority figures that are clueless and useless at best? Shapiro doesn't begin to raise these possibilities in any coherent or interesting fashion.

So we're left with the staging of director Saheem Ali. Initially, the show deploys an interesting device. Backpacks are dangling from the ceiling and at unexpected moments one will fall to the ground and the characters converge on them. Inside they find, say, video cameras or pipe bombs or some other totemic item that leads to the next scene. This strategy is mostly dropped in the second act. Even when the biggest and most imposing bag of all drops to the ground, it doesn't prove to have the weapons we might have expected.

Under the dramatically flat circumstances, the actors do what they can. In secondary roles, Kayla Wickes is amusing and sympathetic while Matthew Bretschneider is an appealing, handsome presence. [The actress Em Grosland](#) has been cast as Eric, a choice that is not loaded with significance in the context of the show. They don't try to make any meta-commentary on the story by having a woman playing this young man; she just seems to have been the actor they chose to cast and does her part ably. James Scully proves to have the somewhat more interesting role of Dylan since in this telling the dim-witted sidekick isn't as humorless as Eric and has more of a relationship with others.

Tech elements are fine. Michael Thurber's sound design throughout and music in one key scene in the second act proves eerie and effective. The costumes of Lux Haac are fine except for the distracting jeans that Eric is given in Act One, which seem inappropriate for that character unless they are trying to make some indication they think Eric is gay. It all adds up to very little, with only the fact that Columbine has begun to fade from memory allowing the show to bore rather than annoy for dealing with such a tragedy in such uninteresting terms. The rare moments of theatricality -- the dropping backpacks, the lip-syncing to Schubert's lieder "The Erlking" at the finale -- aren't nearly enough to justify the affair.

Those interested in this tragedy would do better to read Dave Cullen's sober, exceptionally well-reported book *Columbine* for a non-sensational but wrenching look at this crime and the two young men at its heart. I can still remember details from it and the insight Cullen offers years after it came out.

Here is a performance of the Schubert setting for the poem by Goethe that gives the show its title.

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