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Theater: Well, Actually, I Thought "Actually" Was...

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ACTUALLY ** out of ****

MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB

Perhaps someday a staging of a play about rape won't seem so ferociously timely. Perhaps. But this play would have been timely in 2016 when Trump's vile boasting about sexual assault was all over the airwaves. It would have been timely in 2015 when the acclaimed nonfiction book *Missoula* by Jon Krakauer shone a spotlight on how harassment, assault and rape on campus is under-reported and over-whelming school officials. It would have been timely in 2014 when Rolling Stone published a poorly reported story on a campus rape at the University of Virginia. It would have been timely in 1991 when Anita Hill was on Capitol Hill stating her case. (And when many other women who asked to testify about similar harassment and worse from then-Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas were silenced and ignored.) Frankly, it's hard to think of a time when *Actually* wouldn't have been timely and perhaps it always will be.

So *Actually* by Anna Ziegler can't help but be timely. It could however be better. Impressively, Ziegler has a second drama onstage right now at the Roundabout called *The Last Match*. (Though I'm an ardent tennis fan — the setting of the play — somehow I missed it.) She's got a raft of film, tv and theater projects in the works and her play *Boy* was one of my favorites of last year. So it's a shame to judge this as a let down. And judging is exactly what we're teased/led/misdirected into doing.

Amber and Tom are two new students at Princeton. It's the first few weeks of their time on campus, an overwhelming experience for anyone. They're making friends, figuring out where their classes are and — as college freshmen (freshpeople?) will — flirting and sometimes hooking up. We see Amber (Alexandra Socha) and Tom (Joshua Boone) chatting at a party with Amber proposing an annoying ice breaker, sort of a truth or dare type game. Tom demurs until Amber says he should play...if he wants to sleep with her later. Tom immediately perks up in a "gosh, really?" eager beaver sort of way and off we go.

The next morning Amber sort of casually tells a friend who had been pressuring her to hook up with someone that he "practically" raped her. Soon the dorm adviser is insisting Amber has to take this trauma seriously, for other women if not for herself. Before we can decide whether Amber is being steamrolled or supported, she's filed a formal complaint and we're watching them testify.

This isn't *Witness For The Prosecution* or an Afterschool Special; we assume there probably won't be a tearful confession or a satisfying sense that justice was served a la the end of most *Law & Order* episodes. Ambiguity is all in these modern times. But like the annoying, button-pushing *Oleanna* by David Mamet, the play's manipulation feels grating almost from the start. Every detail that they share feels like a piece of evidence. Any fact that seems to shore up Amber's side is certain to be followed by something positive about Tom. And every detail about one (Amber has feelings of inferiority) will immediately be followed by a similarly "negative" detail about the other (Tom says he had sex with a teacher in high school and mentions as an aside that she later said he was a little rough).

And so on and so forth, much like a tennis match, actually! Add up the points won and often the matches among top pros are pretty damn close, with just a few points separating the winners from the losers. Indeed, the play's most vivid comment is that the evidence will be stacked up on either side and the decision may come down to 50% "and a feather," meaning if the facts are evenly split then even the smallest advantage on one side of the "truth" will prove all the difference.

In this case, the ever-shifting sands feel like a cheat. Life may be ambiguous and most cases of sexual harassment and assault and rape might be difficult to determine when all one has are the statements of two young adults. But Amber herself vacillates repeatedly on whether anything wrong actually occurred in the first place. (Of course, this can happen when women are shaped by society to accept harassment, assault and rape as the norm.) This seems to deserve a lot more attention than, say, past sexual history. (Tom had a lot; Amber very little.) Yet the show doesn't really delve into this dilemma so much as raise it as just one among a host of murky elements to consider.

Whatever went wrong here in the writing, Ziegler turned a pressing issue into a parlor game. Like *Oleanna*, it might raise blood pressure or stoke arguments but those after-show discussions are far more interesting than the drama that sparks them.

Yeah, but did he rape her? Or did she just have morning-after regret? Or something in between? Or should we be asking, yeah, but did she really think he raped her? Even these crass reductions of a messy event feel cheap and annoying. But it's really all the play has to offer. And just like in real life, you can't help but be swayed by the people telling their story. Socha is quite good in the TV show *Red Oaks*. But from the very start of the play, she was mannered and hyper, telegraphing jokes and desperate to be liked. I mean the actress, not the character, though of course that's the character too. In contrast, Boone was handsome, sexy, winning and utterly in command of the stage.

So naturally, I "believed" the better actor and distrusted the poorer one. (Not that I think the problem of the play was casting alone.) Any time a question was made about Amber I felt myself nodding. For example, Amber lost her virginity during Passover on the day she got accepted to Princeton. Ever since she has been completely quiet during sex, she says, as if it's an ingrained lifelong practice. Ever since? It's only been a few months — maybe six — and by her own admission she hasn't had much sex since then. So her insistence on why she wouldn't make a peep during sex — or a rape — felt unconvincing to me. Yet whenever a complication arises in Tom's story — such as his fit of rage that leads to smashing his best friend's violin — I brush it off with some justification. (It was wrong of his gay best friend to put the moves on Tom when he was vulnerable and crying over his mom's diagnosis of terminal cancer, especially since he had already rejected said friend's overtures.)

Yet the last thing I wanted to do was take notes, perhaps listing the positive and negative facts about each character as if this were an Agatha Christie mystery and I Miss Marple. I wanted to listen and learn about them, not judge. I wanted drama, messiness, believable characters and — fine — ambiguity. Ziegler's play *Boy* had all of that. And while there were certainly misguided people or even villains to point to in that story, the play's strength was its desire to see everyone in all their complexity. Here each new fact seems to reduce the two characters to cardboard suspects.

For all that, director Lileana Blain-Cruz presents the drama as well as can be done with the elements at hand. Boone in particular is a real discovery for me. And Ziegler offers one theatrical grace note that ends the play with a visual flourish while cleverly indicating how the case was decided. Of course, the decision itself and certainly the truth about what happened was never intended to be the point. This is not the "solution" to whether a crime was committed or our answer about what to think of it. But the ping-ponging back and forth between each character with every new revelation intended to color our opinion of them was so frustrating and false that we stopped believing in them as characters long ago. Wondering what the decision the court reached was all we have left.

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 **

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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.