

arts

Theater: *Winslow Boy* Guilty of Success; *Juno and the Paycock* Not Framed; Driving Lessons

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THE WINSLOW BOY *** out of ****
JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK ** out of ****
HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE ** out of ****

THE WINSLOW BOY *** out of ****
ROUNABOUT THEATRE AT AMERICAN AIRLINES

This is exactly what one expects of The Roundabout Theatre Company: a strong revival of a classic, traditional play. That's not as easy to do as it sounds, so let's celebrate when they succeed so well. In this case, it's almost shocking to realize that Terence Rattigan's durable drama *The Winslow Boy* hasn't appeared on Broadway since it debuted back in 1947. Thanks to the hoopla surrounding Rattigan's 100th birthday in 2011, the UK was flooded with good to great productions of this playwright once dismissed as rather middle of the road. People soon realized he was richer in talent than that. Here in the US, most of those shows didn't travel (though we did get to see a wonderful cinematic version of *The Deep Blue Sea* by the great film director Terence Davies).

Happily, a UK production of *The Winslow Boy* inspired the Roundabout and we have this entertaining tale capped by an excellent Roger Rees in full fettle as the determined but ailing Arthur Winslow. It's a performance and a show sure to be remembered come Tony time.

My previous experience of the play was limited to David Mamet's excellent film version. I must admit, a two hour and 45 minute version of that fairly straightforward story seemed rather daunting. But not to fear: the play does not feel padded or drawn out in the least when done well.

The set up is simple. Young Ronnie Winslow (Spencer Davis Milford) is home unexpectedly from military school. He has been kicked out for stealing but stoutly insists he didn't do it. Ronnie's stern father (Rees) simply and directly asks the boy if he did it, making clear that lying about it would be far worse than some impulsive act of thievery. But no, Ronnie says, he did not do it and that's enough for father.

The repercussions are enormous. The engagement of Ronnie's sister Catherine (Charlotte Parry) is endangered and his brother Dickie (an enjoyably silly Zachary Booth) must leave university when money becomes tight. The case becomes a national obsession complete with debate in the House of Commons. Worst of all it's

taxing the strength of Ronnie's ailing father who goes from elderly to ancient in front of our eyes: the case is literally killing him.

Director Lindsay Posner presents this drama about the drive for justice and the price to be paid with a blessed lack of fuss. *The Winslow Boy* is not re-imagined or reframed in any way; Posner simply trusts the work will reward a sturdy, thoughtful presentation. The set and costumes by Peter McKintosh follow suit, displaying the Winslow drawing room with an old-fashioned completeness that grounds us in their world and station in life. All other tech elements follow suit.

Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio plays Ronnie's mother with unaffected pleasure. Grace is allowed to be a little more preoccupied with feminine things without being foolish, nothing more and nothing less than a woman of her time. Dickie clearly takes after her as does Booth's performance, which doesn't push the comedy too strongly inherent in this silly son.

Alessandro Nivola is very good as the lawyer Sir Robert Morton. Frankly I've never seem him better on stage as he too makes a virtue of restraint while sparring with the feminist Catherine. It's tempting to be almost abashed at how minor the role is that Michael Cumpsty assays. Yet what a delight he is in turning the hang-dog Desmond Curry into such a complete and affecting character with just a few brief appearances.

But the play rises and falls on the strength of the father and daughter. Parry is very good indeed as Catherine. Smart, penetrating, stubborn in her convictions: she is clearly her father's daughter. If there's a tiny complaint I'd make, it's that she and Nivola aren't allowed the delicious final lines that Mamet used in his film version. Nonetheless, their budding romance comes through wonderfully well.

And what a triumph for Rees, who has been floating on air I trust with his directorial triumph of *Peter and the Starcatcher*. Here he reminds us what an excellent actor he is, almost disintegrating into old age before our eyes and yet never pandering to our sentiment. When the servant Violet (a fine Henny Russell) comes in and gives her bubbling report on the verdict, you can't take your eyes off the silent Rees. He trembles with emotion while absorbing the news of his fate, the outcome of his struggles with the legal system and it's hard not to ache and tear up as realization sinks in for him.

The Winslow Boy has not been revealed as some coruscating classic. It's just a very durable entertainment given a first class revival that deserves to run as long as Rees wants to savor his best role on Broadway in more than a decade.

JUNO AND THE PAYCOCK ** 1/2 out of ** IRISH REPERTORY THEATRE**

The Irish Repertory Theatre recently triumphed with a pitch perfect revival of Conor McPherson's *The Weir* that deserved to transfer to Broadway and become a substantial hit; it was that good. Perhaps any follow-up would pale in comparison. More generally, even the Irish Rep shouldn't tackled Sean O'Casey's epic, tricky masterpiece *Juno And The Paycock* without a massive commitment to scaling the heights of this work.

The play is a deflating look at vainglorious attitudes towards the Irish Civil War. "Captain" Jack Boyle (Ciaran O'Reilly) is a drunken sod, railing at the world and fair weather friends like Joxer Daly (John Keating) when not avoiding work and sneaking off for a drink down at the pub with those self-same pals. His son Johnny (Ed Malone) was wounded in the fighting and sits at home all day, moaning his fate and panicky over the dreaded knock on the door that might mean discovery by one side or presumably conscription for more danger by the other.

Like women everywhere, Juno (a no-nonsense J. Smith-Cameron) must actually get on with the work of making money, keeping their shambles of an apartment clean and trying to knock some sense into her feckless husband. She's helped by her daughter Mary (Mary Mallen), who seems sensible enough though we're vaguely astonished to see her refusing the intentions of Jerry Devine (David O'Hara) in favor of a rather fastidious Charlie Bentham (James Russell).

The lives of the Boyles are slowly disintegrating but that's up-ended when it appears Captain Jack will be coming into a major inheritance. Even the promise of an influx of money manages to turn their slow descent into a speedy collapse, as most anyone who's won the lottery can surely attest.

Funny, painful, sprawling, ambitious, merciless -- these are the attributes of O'Casey's play as written. But this production by director Charlotte Moore never comes close to capturing that complexity.

The set by James Noone and costumes by David Toser are the highlights here: they have a genuine specificity. You can see the decay in their lives mirrored without emphasis by the sagging wallpaper. (Though even here the placement of the door seems awkward; actors entering the set seem to be in the middle of the apartment before they've barely arrived.)

Context and specificity is precisely what the rest of the show lacks. The civil war, the paranoia, the danger, the changing allegiances and desperate desire to just survive, false patriotism and foolish pride -- all of this would bring the story of the Boyles to life and all of it is missing. Without understanding the world they live in and the issues at stake, the tragedy never has a chance to take hold.

Malone's Johnny is simply a bore, moaning and whining about everyone around him, when of course we should realize before the rest of the family that he is harboring some terrible secret or at least be astonished when it is revealed. O'Hara doesn't make much of an impression but he's very appealing nonetheless, which confuses us into thinking Mary must be calculating what's best for the family when rejecting him for the unappealing Bentham. When she insists it's Bentham she loves, we can't help but wonder why when O'Hara is playing the rival. O'Reilly never creates the larger than life, Falstaffian figure that Jack Boyle can be. So his fall echoes far less loudly.

On the plus side, Smith-Cameron is a solid Juno, grounding herself (if not the show) in the business of getting on with things. Mallen is quite good as her daughter until their final scene where her tears struggle to fall. That's no surprise since ours do too. Only Keating (who was so good in that marvelous *Weir*) captures the mercurial Joxer to perfection. His head pops into the home like a snapping turtle and his body slowly follows; he's ready to bolt at the first sign of danger, with danger generally being the arrival of Juno. He coaxes and wheedles and glad-hands until he senses weakness or changing fortunes and then turns on you like a jackal. If you wonder how fickle some people can be in a time of crisis, how ready to jump one way or another if it's to their advantage, if you want see how good O'Casey's play can be, just watch Joxer.

HOW I LEARNED TO DRIVE ** out of ** TONGUE IN CHEEK THEATRE**

Tongue In Cheek is an Off Off Broadway company celebrating its eighth season, a major achievement in and of itself. They caught my eye with a funny production during the Fringe Festival a few years ago and now I've checked back in with their revival of the award-winning Paula Vogel play *How I Learned To Drive*.

It's a tricky work that requires a delicate balancing act this production has yet to pull off. But keep in mind with the short runs such companies can provide I was reviewing only its second or so actual performance. I'm sure the cast will be tighter and sharper soon...probably just as their run comes to an end on November 2. Such is the life of a tiny theater company with little room for luxuries like extended rehearsals or previews. Still, it's enough to reveal some talent in the cast.

The story is straightforward but presented in a complex flashback structure that wins over your...empathy (certainly sympathy is not the right word) only to slap you with the realization of what a violation you have been witnessing all along. L'il Bit (Jake Lipman, who also directed) is a winning, smart young girl with a family that wants nothing more than to keep her down. She's burdened by a boorish dad (Michael Edmund), a mom (Shelley Little) who doesn't quite know how to want more for her daughter and breasts that are big enough to exhaust L'il Bit and fascinate every boy in sight.

Thank god for Uncle Peck (an excellent Lynn Berg). He's smart and funny and

actually listens to L'il Bit and takes her seriously. He encourages her ambition to go to college, takes her out to nice restaurants on big occasions and even teaches her to drive. He's also molesting her.



(photo by Maeghan Donoghue)

Vogel's play is wonderfully sneaky as it seems to presents Uncle Peck in the best possible light, for a pedophile that is. He really has L'il Bit's best interests at heart, right? When we first flashback from 1988, we see Peck and L'il Bit in a car parked off in the middle of nowhere in the backroads of Maryland. He's polite and thoughtful and repeatedly tells the teenage girl he won't do anything she doesn't want. She's in charge and if she draws a line, Uncle Peck won't cross it. Of course, by the end of the scene we see Uncle Peck unbuttoning her blouse (with permission!) and gently stroking his niece's nipples and then kissing them.

Of course, it's the very illusion of power for a teenager that is so seductive. L'il Bit can never truly be in control, because Uncle Peck has been preying on her vulnerability since she was 11 years old. She'll be in college before L'il Bit can sort of find the courage to break away from his grip and even then we'll see her repeating the cycle of abuse by sleeping with a high

school boy when she's a teacher.

The play itself is excellent and Berg captures the self-deluding emotions of a molester like Uncle Peck very well. Less successful is Lipman's own journey as L'il Bit. She strikes mostly the same note throughout the show, not capturing as well the girl's journey from friendly niece to confused but flattered teen to angry adult. It's a very subtle, challenging part she might well nail down as the run progresses. The others are even less successful, though Edmund has his best moment as the high school boy L'il Bit sleeps with while Holland Hamilton makes the most of her big scene when she acknowledges to the audience at least some understanding of Peck's proclivities. Having the voice-over be done by a cast member and the awkward presence of a picnic bench dominating the tiny space throughout were also not the best choices.

It's Berg I'll remember best and the show is worth seeing to savor his talent. Uncle Peck is charming and pathetic, needy and controlling, sad and sadistic -- he's so good at engaging your emotions you almost feel bizarrely betrayed for L'il Bit when we discover he's also molested at least one little boy. Sure, he's screwed up, but you almost want to believe he's monstrously screwed up specifically and only for L'il Bit, as if that would make the betrayal less monstrous. It wouldn't and that's the power of *How I Learned To Drive* -- forcing you to deal afresh with the horror of pedophilia without the easy dismissal of pedophiles as "monsters." They're people and that's far, far worse.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2

Picnic * 1/2

Opus No. 7 ** 1/2

Deceit * 1/2

Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2

The Jammer ***

Blood Play ** 1/2

Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2

Women Of Will ** 1/2

All In The Timing ***

Isaac's Eye ***

Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2

The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2

Much Ado About Nothing ***

Really Really *

Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2

The Madrid * 1/2

The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2

Passion at CSC *** 1/2

Carousel at Lincoln Center ***

The Revisionist **

Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***

Rock Of Ages * 1/2

Ann ** 1/2

Old Hats ***

The Flick ***

Detroit '67** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2
NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *
Women Or Nothing ** 1/2
Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play * 1/2
You Never Can Tell ***
Romeo And Juliet *
Arguendo **
August Wilson's American Century Cycle ****
The Glass Menagerie ** 1/2
Lady Day * 1/2
Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse ****
Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical ** 1/2
Bronx Bombers * 1/2
Romeo & Juliet at CSC * 1/2
A Night With Janis Joplin **
The Winslow Boy ***
Juno And The Paycock **
How I Learned To Drive **

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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.*

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