

Theater: Your Friendly Neighborhood Vampire; Deadly Da

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LET THE RIGHT ONE IN **

DA no rating

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ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE

The film *Let the Right One In* is a remarkable work. I'm not one for gore, so horror films are not my forte. But the best of them, from *Frankenstein* in the 1930s to *The Fly* to this, explore ideas of humanity far more than ideas of terror. I ignored the US remake -- why bother when the Swedish original was so ideal?

But a stage adaptation intrigues. Shamefully I purchased but have yet to read the novel by John Ajvide Lindqvist (who also wrote the film's screenplay). His tale is faithfully adapted by Jack Thorne and given a handsome, thoughtful, intelligent production led by director John Tiffany (*Once*, *Black Watch*) and associate director Stephen Hoggett. I wish I knew why it never gelled for me.

On one simplistic but highly of-the-moment level, this story, set in the 1980s, is about bullying. Oskar (the show's standout, Cristian Ortega) is a lonely boy relentlessly taunted and teased and humiliated by his classmates. His mother is a divorced alcoholic, both too needy and too indifferent to Oskar's needs as a child to be any help. His father is in a gay relationship and keeps Oskar at arm's length. Other adults are benign at best and usually indifferent or even cruel.

Is it any wonder Oskar sucks up the attention of the weird little girl who moves into his apartment complex? Sure, she seems younger than him and smells a bit and is genuinely odd, whereas Oskar is just sad. But she talks to him and, in her own weird (very weird) way, pays attention. The fact that this girl named Eli (Rebecca Benson) may not exactly be a girl? Well, Oskar can deal with that. The fact that she may not be younger than him or a girl or a boy or really anything he can quite bring himself to name? Well, give him time.

On another level, *Let the Right One In* is not about friendship or bullying or young romance (truly, it couldn't be farther from that if it tried). Watching the film, you come to the unsettling realization that Eli, this creature that feeds on blood simply realizes her aging human protector (procurer is more like it) simply isn't up to the task anymore. She needs a new helper and grooms Oskar for the role. Again and again, we see Eli lure adults to their doom by crying out in a helpless, little-girl voice, "Help me; please, help me!" only to pounce when they come within biting distance. *Let the Right One In* is one long plea from Eli to Oskar, we sense. Help me, she is saying but it's not his blood she wants; it's his heart and soul. How much crueler is that?

With Tiffany on board as director, you knew the show would be visually striking and it is, with a snowy wood dominating the stage throughout. (I thought the toasty venue of St. Ann's should have allowed the A/C to run full blast; if ever a show would benefit from some shivery atmosphere, this is it.) The work of set and costume designer Christine Jones (hand in hand with the lighting by Chahine Yavroyan and sound by Gareth Fry and effective special effects by Jeremy Chernick) was impeccable.

The first stumble for me was the music by Olafur Arnalds, which skipped genres and styles in distracting

fashion, sounding techno-ish one minute and film score-ish the next. Typically, the action was broken at times by stylized movement, the sort of signature flourish Tiffany and Hoggett are known for. It certainly wasn't a negative in this show, but here those moments felt merely decorative, not integral to the work or revealing of any emotional undercurrent.

More tellingly, my suspension of disbelief didn't ever take place for Eli, played so memorably in the original film by Lina Leandersson (who was twelve years old when the movie was shot). Benson is not bad in the role (no one in the show is weak, as such). But her affectless delivery and much older appearance threw off the show for me. She looks older than the original Eli (much older) and older than Oskar. And that led to cascading problems. With this central relationship not as convincing (and more straightforwardly one of monster and child), the spotlight shone brighter on the rest of the drama. But the bullying aspect is the least interesting aspect; Oskar's parents seem so indifferent and incompetent here you thought more of an after-school special than the complex world this boy lives in. Ditto, the head bully who is of course bullied even more by his older brother. That feels too obvious now whereas the same detail in the movie informed a minor character (others have their own monsters to deal with) rather than banally explanatory. Finally, the staging of the swimming pool finale fell flat, with the stylized choices here by Tiffany not working either as terror or terribly beauty.

Ortega is committed to his role, and despite the production's flaws, seeing him wrap his arm around the box containing his "girlfriend" or scratching out a Morse code communication with Eli are creepy, heart-breaking moments. But for all the care that went into it, one doesn't feel this production can stand on its own. The film *Once* was flawed but charming and a genuinely nutty idea to turn into a stage musical. They did it brilliantly. Here, the film was so successful and so rich that surely they imagined the results could only be better. The temptation of turning a brilliant film into a play is surely an enticing one. Yet you'd better have a very good reason for allowing such a magnetic, overpowering presence into your creative life. The belief that you can transform it or at least partner with it might just turn into the reality that it has overwhelmed you.

DA no rating

IRISH REPERTORY THEATRE AT DR2 THEATRE

Oh dear. Some nights at the theater do little but provide war stories for the actors involved. That surely must be the case for night I caught the revival of the Tony-winning *Da*, produced by the Irish Repertory Theatre (which is hosting its season off Union Square at DR2 while their space is being renovated). The piece, by Hugh Leonard, is a memory play, with a man who's come to put his late father's affairs in order soon overwhelmed by the pushy, talkative ghost of his dad and a host of memories: his mother, his childhood, his first job, his first romance and so on.

I've never seen *Da* before but can imagine a sharper revival might coax out the lightning-fast switches in emotion, from humor to pity to anger to sadness to gentle acceptance more fluidly. But the performance I caught was a series of disasters for all involved, from the unruly audience (one elderly woman kept chatting to her friend, to cite one example of many) to that disease all actors dread: forgetting your lines. It spread faster than Ebola ever did here in the U.S., with almost the entire cast soon stumbling here and there. When one actor is off, that can tense up the rest, put them off their rhythm, and soon everybody and their mother is stumbling.

This was capped by a *Noises Off*-like disaster: the door to the home that served as the show's one and only set jammed completely right at the start of Act Two. Ciaran O'Reilly as the adult son Charlie strode up to the door and then pushed and pushed and pushed. His younger self tagging behind (it's a memory play, after all) urged him on. "Give it more of a shove," he suggested as they stood stranded on the edge of the stage. O'Reilly kicked and shoved and shook the door until the entire set began to wobble when the other actor (the able Adam Petherbridge) spoke up again: "Maybe we should go in the back way." God forgive me, it was the highlight of the show.

The poor actors had to enter and exit the house in the most circuitous fashion, with one and all reminded constantly about the damnable door. They recovered as best as they could, but one could imagine them all bursting out in rueful laughter and downing more than the usual drinks later, praying such a night wouldn't come again anytime soon.

It's a reminder that every review is just really a review of that one particular night's performance. I doubt sincerely that this fuzzy revival directed by Charlotte Moore would have garnered much more than two stars out of four on its best night. The play didn't come into focus, and the varied feelings of each scene seemed more haphazard than purposeful. (I've never seen it before, nor the movie version.) If it wasn't for that stuck door, I would have said James Morgan's set was serviceable along with the other tech elements.

Beyond the nightmarish forgetting of lines, I would have also noted that the accents on display were far more varied than usual, with Fiana Toibin as our hero's mom mumbling her lines so much that I imagine the audience member who kept talking was asking what the woman had said. Nicola Murphy's accent as a girl our young hero fancies was wandering and quite variable, while I haven't the foggiest idea which of many accents used in one scene to critique Kristin Griffith on.

The men, it must be said, fared better in that regard, though the technical issue of accents isn't nearly as important as the characters being brought to life. Petherbridge did well by young Charlie, and John Keating (notably spot-on in both accent and his lines, which is the least one should have to say about an actor) was typically strong in the role of one-time pal Oliver. Sean Gormley as Charlie's first employer actually created a living, breathing character with Drumm, the lad's first boss and a man who is so snobbish and particular he manages to close himself off from life. One could be forgiven for thinking his story was the heart of the show.

But the heart of the play should be the bantering and battling between Charlie and his Da (Paul O'Brien). This night, this performance, it felt rote and unremarkable, one long comedy routine rather than the coming to terms of a son or the last cry of life from the ghost of a dad. Every show has nights where everything goes wrong. Every cast would prefer to forget them as quickly as possible. Such train wrecks can provide great anecdotes years later but are no fun when they happen and not fun for quite a while after. So let's just pass over this night of Da in silence. It's a memory of one memory play I'm sure they'd prefer we soon forget.

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[Constellations](#) ** 1/2

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[Let The Right One In](#) **

Da no rating

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