

New York 2013

### Golden Boy

I was knee-jerk keen to be able to see a well-mounted and acted revival of Clifford Odets' famous Pulitzer prize-winner from the '37. It is, indeed, a well-crafted, accessible tragedy of the male quest for celebrity, art vs. sport and family stress. One is tempted to say *alas, very accessible*, because to the modern ear the literalness of it is much too preachy. Joe Bonaparte want glory in boxing and abandons his musical talent as a violinist, to the great disappointment of his father, a loving immigrant labourer. In the striving he becomes pushy and vain, destroys his hands and true artistic talent, kills in the ring then dies in a car crash with his new found trashy broad. The play's dilemma - a talented musician having a serious athletic talent - is one that seems to have some resonance in contemporary NYC, appealing, I suppose to the self-perception, the vanity, of elite New Yorkers and their tourist admirers.

I note that there are two other old plays currently opening revivals, Picnic and Cat On a Hot Tin Roof – three if you count Virginia Woolf, which is slightly later. Maybe there is a new hunger in the elite for well crafted plays? They're all about sexy (straight) men who fail, three of the four written by gay men (Woolf has a key sub-plot about a sexy straight man who is merely humiliated.)

The set was handsome and filled the big Broadway. I thought this performance was so-so, although the rest of the audience – and the critics - liked it. I don't believe the actors were miked, which is good in my books, and they were all doing pretty well in the large Belasco Theatre which is shallow, which helped – and broad, which doesn't. Never mind that those of us in the side aisles seats were not sharing this treat so well.

The lead male, young boxer, Joe Bonaparte, looked like a violin prodigy but he was too skinny to be the least convincing as a closet boxer. But he couldn't play the violin and had to go off stage for the key scene and we hear him playing in the wings. Very poor. The actor emoted well enough. Seth Numrich as Joe Bonaparte seems to have been cast for his acting ability rather than his looks. What a thing to complain about! The other characters seemed cartoonish on the big stage but that's how they were written, gamblers, hustlers et. al. who corrupt our young hero.

I believe the problem is that nowadays we get this kind of drama on TV, very up-close and convincing. TV actors never shout or declaim. Theatre should do what TV can't, which perform grandly the intimate as if it were Shakespeare and thereby ennoble the characters. Much turns on whether the theatre is large or small. Emoting grandly in a small theatre just seems over the

top. According to me small theatres are for the intimate soap operas plays and large theatres for the grand stuff. Some texts are worthy of one and some belong in the other. I sometimes say 'the best dramatic writing is now done for television'. I retract this. The question is - what dramatic writing plays well on the big stage. Bottom line –which plays are worthy of the actors shouting, whoops, 'declaiming grandly'? (And that is their reason to live.)

My guess is that I would have preferred this play in a small theatre with less grandness. The tragedy would have been more personal. Perhaps other people than me – like everybody – are more inclined to accept as 'grand' the decline and fall of a sports star.

[Quaere – there is no theatre large enough in Toronto to bestow and demand the grandeur effect. It dictated the nature of our theatrical writing with the long run effect of purging 'grandeur'.]

### Peter and The Starcatcher

This hugely popular comedy is, hugely entertaining, cleverly written, expertly performed, totally delightful, by god, even a bit touching and actually funny. Great stuff! It is fun for the kids because of very animated acting and clowning not to mention being an accessible riff on a very familiar story. And it is so deft a reconstruction of the familiar Peter Pan tale, technically a prequel, and so well larded with adult puns and comments that it was a treat for cranky old me who measures great theatre against Sondheim lyrics and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf pyrotechnics.

The Tony it won for Best Directing was well deserved. There were dozens of sequences of superbly staged collective skits – stormy oceans, crocodiles, fights etc. None of this need expensive stage equipment. And the script was written for quick repartee and also some gross mugging and the cast was up for every bit of it.

It's hard to think of theatre I have enjoyed more.

The show was based on a Disney-Hyperion teen book by the same name. The notes say it had developmental runs at the Williamstown Theater Festival and the La Jolla Playhouse and came to NYC via the New York Theatre Workshop in 2011 before transferring to Broadway in 2012. The named writer is Rick Elice. Disney Theatrics is listed as a sponsor. The development history in more detail would be interesting. It has the same flavor and delight as Shrek – the deconstruction and re-assembly of old tales for children and adults.

It will run forever.



There was a crew of young teen girls in the audience who loved it, girl triumphant and first kiss. (And not so sure for teen boys but who cares about them anymore.)

That said, the next day I woke up and thought to myself 'what the fuck'! Without having an emotional moment to think about it in the rush of theatrical good time, they have turned sexism on its head in the name of girl power. All the men are fools or villains, albeit very funny, especially in their cross-dressing skit. The only thing they do heroically is ham. To this there is exception of Molly's father, a foil for his a-list daughter who is only woman on stage and girl triumphant, the very point of the re-write of Barrie's ancient sexist screed. (He gets captured, and rescued by daughter Molly.) The lost boys are pathetic and Peter is saddest of all, scared by his orphan-dom, emotionally stunted, passive, and consigned by the author and characters to stay that way because it's best for him. He is a step-stone on Molly's road to triumph - Oxford Debating Union and no doubt a junior Cabinet post before thirty. This is girl power for new century. And it indeed it does seem for the best because clearly this doormat while never get off the floor. His future is clear - bound and boot licking the shiny boots of some leather-clad dominatrix and begging for a little pussy. One suspects the teen girls would love a skit playing this out, it would seem right and fun. The historic psychic wrongs of Barrie's deep Victorian sexism are blasted from our consciousness. And hurray for that. The show is so good and the tides of time so strong it doesn't occur that this might not be *altogether* a good thing. What if, what if, I wrote a charming play in which the triumphant and happy resolution was that little girls were told to stay that way and wear pixy dresses for all eternity and that was good and proper and their destiny and they would be much happier? What if I argued this apostasy was perfectly fine because the acting was so good and the show was soooo funny.

### Water By The Spoonful

This play, first produced at Hartford Stage, written by Quaiara Alegria Hudes, a drama academic, won the 2112 Pulitzer without ever having a NY production. It's an interesting, good and serious play. But not that good. The production at Second Stage was excellent. The theatre is not so large they had to emote loudly and turn the play into something it wasn't.

There are two interlocking stories. One is about a chat group for crack addicts who help each other anonymously, sort of, with digital intimacy. There are four actors on stage who speak directly to each other although it is clear they have never met. It is very effective. The other story is about a Puerto Rican extended family, coping with the death of a matriarch and passing the mantel on to another powerful woman. This is mostly seen through the eyes of a young PR male, Elliot, a returned war vet, trapped in a shit job. Nothing much happens in this story and if it weren't for some good acting, pain, shame, hope, etc. it might be tedious and patronizing.

Within the second story there is something more going on for the returned vet – nightmares and ambition for something better. He is the one character for whom I had some serious empathy, as I believe the author intended. There were two scenes where it was hinted but not explained that something bad happened in Iraq. Maybe I'm obtuse and the two scenes told more than I got and my apologies to the writer - but probably not. This sub-plot needed some serious flesh and bones. (Hudes has written two other plays about Elliot of which I know nothing.) The promo bumpf says the play is about how he deals with his demons. But that's not what's on stage and if that was the intention they fucked up – more likely in the final editing than the writing.

The title refers to a remembered last moment of mother's tenderness and caring. That's what the play is about. It's about family frailty and how that failure and the yearning for a good mother. And it's pretty good.

The two viable stories fit together well enough eventually and have a noble tragic arc. But the inarticulate – omitted - history and tragedy of the central character – the vet - is a major flaw. It's still a good play but as written not a great one. The tragedy is that it got picked too early for its Pulitzer and now it is writ in stone.

### Zero Cost Housing

Zero Cost Housing by Pig Iron Company and Japanese writer Toshika Okada was part of the Under The Radar Festival at the Public Theatre, their once yearly presentation of experimental theatre from around the world.

It was interesting ... as in .... challenging ....as in ... is this a play? ... are they getting paid to do this? ... as in ... do you need a graduate degree to understand this?

What I saw is very hard to describe. It is an anti-play, deliberately breaking all the rules and conventions. One wonders why these writers and performers do this. The piece does offer some insight into this important question about the *avante guard* today. And if you think I'd just out and tell you what I mean - not on your life!

The lighting was the same when we walked in, as the show started, throughout the show, when it ended and when we left the theatre. Think of a well-lit, all night laundromat. The actors were largely successful in their effort not to act, by which I mean, they stumbled deliberately in their words, um-ed and paused and seemed to forget. If there weren't 300 people in the room watching you'd swear these were some stoned friends of your cousin who flunked out of American Lit 101 and couldn't figure out why and were determined to persuade you they'd give



Thoreau a second change if you'd just fork over some cheese cake. The lead character, by which I mean the one who talked the most, was a beefy white guy who, with touching modesty and complete conviction, introduced himself as Japanese playwright hired to write something for an American theatre company. This, I thought at the time, was a fantastic break-through in multi-cultural casting, the white guy gets to pretend he is Japanese.

The playwright has two persona, both of whom, at different points, sit at desks writing the play we are watching, one a young student and one the thirty-seven year old. The young (male) writer as a student is a girl. The sex change surgery is omitted from the text. The two writers who are the same writer, write for two characters, two middle class rabbits, a loving suburban couple with a baby rabbit asleep off-stage. At the beginning of the play – I mean, thing – the older, Toshika asks his younger self what she is writing about and she says Henry David Thoreau asks his younger self to describe a little bit about her thoughts and she says ... she says ... it's too difficult to put into words and besides it private. It's very moving ... babble. Later the older Toshika tells us he is re-evaluating his younger thoughts about Thoreau. How? A secret.

The older writer meets Thoreau who appears on stage to discuss the necessity of authorial arrogance. Anyhow the rabbits appear at different points wearing different parts of their rabbit costumes and, as noted above, with different actors taking the part of the husband. It might be the mommy-rabbit was also two different actors at different points. I didn't pick up on that. You really got to pay attention to understand utter nonsense. They talk about the problem of his mother sending too many toys to their babe and how to deal with this, until they run out of words and look to the on-stage author to give them more to say, or not. Some people in the audience thought the rabbit costumes were funny and laughed. Some thought this was absurd, and laughed. Some thought - since they read about it in the Times and paid to see it at The Public Theatre - it must be funny and laughed.

Anyhow, Henry David let's himself into the rabbits' house because the weather is bad – remember, from his book – and they talk about this and that . Then Henry and the beefy-white-guy-Japanese-writer and Henry is speak directly about the arrogance of famous writers telling readers and audiences anything. It is *necessary*, they seem to agree, once you get to be famous. This part was really moving.

And then a fast-talking Japanese anti-architect played by scrawny hipster white boy tells about his new country established entirely in Facebook (I think) and appoints the rabbits as members of his Cabinet and then Toshika and the rabbits move to a remote island with Mr anti-architect to avoid the radiation in Tokyo. I forgot, the Japanese writer's manager appears on stage and reluctantly and politely tells him he's an asshole. He graciously agrees. And then the people up front tell us the play is over.

There is no intermission, wisely, or the audience would have escaped.

In theory and in principle I like the idea that every person should have their turn with the stage, their fifteen minutes, whether they have anything to say or not. Democracy is democracy. If this had been the ramblings of a randomly selected schizophrenic it would have been a triumph. However I know from the programme that this writer has done it before. I wonder if this famous writer and experimental theatre company would be willing to go the next step – the last wave, *le derniere vague*, I call it, - and henceforth perform without an audience in the dark? I'm sure there are many people who would pay – or at least stand in line outside to get on the waiting list to buy a ticket.

There is lots of 'post-modern' art the premise of which is there is no such thing and the so-called artist is there to tell the stupid audience just that. The best post-modern art is that sugar coats the message and delivers same with charm and ironic elan. So we, who pay, don't even know how stupid we are thought to be. This anti-play is a breakthrough of sorts. There is no sugar. In the middle of this mocking rubbish heap the writer is good enough to admit he is an arrogant prick with nothing to say. Where can modern theatre go after this!

#### Hamlet Prince of Grief

As the second helping of the Under The Radar buffet I saw a fifty year old, seemingly depressed, Iranian doing his loose, very, rendition of Hamlet, in, in Farsi, with sub-titles, sitting at a desk unpacking a suitcase of children's toys and cooking utensils with which he enacts the adventures of the gloomy Dane. He's purportedly traveling for some beach time with his buds to recover from heavy studying. He gets the bad news about pop on his cell phone. Mom calls him several times to come home and reminds him to bring his good suit for the funeral. Ophelia is a Barbie doll, of course, dad, a lion, mom, a cow. Cute. In this version mom pours the poison – to each his own villain.

There was no sword fight – which was/is a huge mistake because it's the best part of the source play, and the only reason to stay awake for five acts. This was only thirty minutes, a wise call, not because it was bad but because even with surtitles there is only so much. I wonder if this was an abbreviated version. Maybe there is a great sword fight yet to come, with Marvel characters - Thor could be Fortinbras. Hamlet can only get better.

This comes from the Leev Theatre Company which the programme tells us "seeks new ways of exchanging knowledge and experience and expanding a more enriching understanding of the art of theatre in Iran..." It comes from their Mono Leev Festival which "creates ground for



various artists and playwrights to work with each other in the form of Monologue and Monodrama ...”

I know nothing about ‘western’ theatre in Iran. Are our classics unknown and this is the only way they are presented and known? Are they so well known that the deconstruction of them, as I witnessed, is far advanced and charming, as this my Sunday supper treat.

### Le Comte Ory

This Rossini opera at the Met featured some staggeringly good singers – Juan Diago Florez and Pretty Yende – and others.

The plot is ridiculous. I don’t even want to think about it, let alone write something .... except ... except ... why do I object to ridiculous story lines in opera and not in other stage entertainment? I think the problem is that so little happens when the actors to sing it which takes up sooooo much time, time taken away from plot and character development.

The plot is about a casanova count who tries to score with a high class virgin-type lady, Adele, whose virtue is unprotected because her brother is away on the Crusades. He is assisted in this debauchery by his page – a cross-dressing mezzo (don’t ask) and his drunk friend, a tenor, and opposed by his tutor, a basso. He disguises first as a hermit and then a nun. Adele finally lets him into her castle but, too bad for him, prefers the mezzo. However, just in the nick of time for virtue the crusading brother returns and Comte Ory flees.

Rossini is elaborately tuneful and more fun to listen to than the heavy stuff. But the words are utter rubbish. Elvis Presley had as much to say in a single song as Rossini in this whole f-g production. I love nonsense scripts but not when the words are repeated over and over and over.

The basic problem with opera is that they sing. I do not really understand why. Deep in my heart.

The Met is a glorious building but a bit tatty inside. They need to spend some more money.

### The Other Place

This interesting slip of a play by Sharr White- a serious play about advancing dementia – is a vehicle for Laurie Metcalfe, a scenery chomping powerhouse. It is the current Broadway ‘hot ticket’. Metcalfe is great as her illness advances and she is dragged kicking and screaming in

madness and then nothingness. The story is a contrivance about a drug researcher in the very area where she herself is struck down. The first two thirds is about her fading self control and delusions about her long-lost daughter. The last third is about the final stages as the memories fade into chaos and blank is confusing.

Laurie Metcalfe attracted a lot of publicity to this production. She was excellent and I doubt the play would have 'made it' without her. Watching her rant as she progresses into madness and blankness is all totally entertaining. I had no sense of tragedy. Really, all that happened was that I watched a world-class rant-er.

The rest of the cast is not up to her standards. I have the suspicion they cut out a lot of story where Metcalfe is not on stage. The four of us could not agree what had happened in the last scene.

#### Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf

There's a real story in three acts with dramatic arc and ending, some mystery, funny, deep and sexy with more verbal pyrotechnics than any play I can think of. The cast is totally awesome. There's no doubt about it – great theatre.

I come from a family where sexual repression was the highest virtue, where shouting of any sort would be worse than shitting on the fine dining table, and where, in any event, no one could formulate words – not even name-calling - worthy of raising the voice. Faint traces of sarcasm was all-time number one on the hit parade of emotions. The raised voice was reserved for cheering the Leafs on Saturday night. (If you did shit on the dining room table it would be cleaned up quickly and quietly and nobody ever mention it.)

So Virginia Woolf blows the lid off and I love it. I said to a friend that it was "gripping" and he said it was more than that. But there can be no finer compliment than 'gripping' – experiencing through the magic of theatre things missed, brilliantly poisonous things said loudly.

I was so blown away and emotionally exhausted by George and Martha and so determined that my mood not be corrupted by something so frivolous as love or hope and so determined that no lesser actors erode my reverie that I skipped the planned evening theatre and bought take-out meat loaf and stayed home and read - yes *read* – a play. (Ruined, Lynn Nottage's Pulitzer prize play on war, rape, pillage, whores, genital mutilation, and coltan and diamond smuggling in the darkest Congo was refreshing and deeply restorative.) Reading is the ticket - no actors to bite you.

There were many things that I had forgotten or missed or hadn't been there when I saw the film long



ago. The film was no doubt heavily censored. I have, for example, no recall of the young professor as a *objet sexuel* nor of his failure in the act, let alone Martha's taunting him for it.

There is a risk in turning loose such powerful performers, that they overwhelm their characters and the story. Here the two leads are so overwhelmingly brilliant that the improbability of the story is brought into focus. George and Martha are so articulate and smart that surely they would have separated long ago and gone on to successful lives. But I guess Albee's point was to give voice to the rage and he chose smart people to do the shouting because he could put smart things in their mouths. The point was the rage, words spoken of unspoken dreams and thoughts. When George and Martha go quiet and cuddly, sort of, at the end of the play, the play ended.

Grand theatre works here. The shouting ennobles. There are no tears in the audience. It is a formal tragedy, not a real one. This is a play that would not transfer well to the small screen. It needs the big stage and the gold medal voice gymnasts to dramatize the unspoken, make them larger than life that the tragedy which is in the subconscious realm, can be real for these memorable theatrical moments. (I wonder, if you wore ear phones and watched on it on TV the effect would be as good?)

Albee followed Tennessee Williams and William Inge, from the earlier decade, the fifties, in baring on stage the sex which society then put out of sight. All were gay. The Pulitzer was denied to this play because of its open adultery. Here, again, sex is the driver and the sexiest person on the stage is a guy. The play is openly about calculated adultery and the lust for children. Here the sexy young biologist does not bear his pecs – heavens, at a faculty party. But he represents the seeming freedom of the philandering swordsman, until crash and burn, he can't get it up for Martha. Is this a gay man's scorn of pointlessly claustrophobic straight marriage, the insightful fag giving voice to straight guy regrets?

The story is utterly sexist in the sense that the women have no useful purpose other than child-bearing and because it portrays the two males as tragically stuck in hell essentially because their wives can't reproduce. Why am I married and how can I cope? You certainly have to wish - these women need useful work. But the ultimate message is not so sexist. It is the false promise of marriage itself and as such very current and wise.

### Jammers

This was a new show at the Atlantic Theatre, in their small annex theatre about 50s roller derby, athletic ambition again, this time a struggling ex-orphan – from Brooklyn – lead astray from his lady love by the evil promoters, again, who of course fail him but it's not too late and he re-unites. She's pregnant by another, she's ugly but he marries anyhow. It's done comic book style on a small stage, cleverly physical, bouncing buses, roller coasters, roller derby skaters – lots of fun to watch, it moves quickly – a good thing given the paper thin plot – and is quickly forgotten.

New York – April 2013

This is a second trip to NYC this year, unexpected but necessary to meet with Terra Holman, the long missing witness in the Browne file. Hopefully this interview will be smooth on Friday afternoon and the rest of the time I can work on Browne in isolation and see some theatre.

I got luck with timing and connections traveling down and managed to stop by QuikTiks at noon right after getting off the bus from Newark, get to my hotel and then up to Lincoln Centre for a 2pm matinee.

The show was Ann, a bio-monologue of / about Ann Richards the Democratic Governor of Texas, and a folk hero to many feminists. I knew little about her going in, liked her a lot coming out as feisty 'character'. But if there was any political fight she had while in office it didn't emerge. Other than being a woman and a Democratic in Texas and maybe that's enough. Indeed for this audience it seemed that way. She gave the Keynote Speech to the Democratic Convention in ?? '88. The performer, Holland Taylor, was also the writer based on her own research which according to the programme was a lot of interviews.

As a one-woman show it was good. Ann held forth as if giving a commencement address and political pep talk. It was a charming portrait and the audience loved it. Lots of funny lines. ... if you live together and then get married in in Arkansas and then move to Texas and get a divorce are you still brother and sister? ... three dogs about to be 'put down' ... biting ... the third a Great Dane ... rape ... doing my nails and something for my breath ... you go out on a limp because that's where the fruit is ...

But the middle part – Ann in her Governor's office was confused. What was her issue? Not easy to do – hold the stage for almost two hours. The staging, lighting etc. was flashy and effective.

So what does this tell me about 'Eleanor'. Would a one woman show / monologue be effective, especially if you dressed it up? Would it have legs in NYC? Another feminist. There have been ER shows. Would the lesbian angle help or hurt?

The experience – good but not great theatre – but literate and serious – and one of a number of such efforts in town at the moment – rekindled by desire to live here and see lots and write. Perhaps it's affordable. I have no faith I can get an audience in Toronto. There is probably much less chance in NYC but at least there is better stuff to look at. I need to look more closely at Toronto opportunities. At least there I have a better chance of making my own.

Makes me anxious to get Brown 'done' so I can move on.

\*\*

Weather is beautiful, warm though muggy. The people are out in the parks soaking it up.

\*\*

Wednesday evening I saw a new musical – The Last Five Years – really a set of songs, vaguely related, about a deteriorating relationship of a young heterosexual couple – he a successful novelist and she a



not so successful Broadway-type performer. The plot is – they fall in love and then they break up. I don't mind that the reasons for failure are murky - I'm vaguely on his side but only because I don't quite get 'what's her problem'.

There were some good songs, approaching Jacques Brel / Sondheim quality, tuneful with real lyrics and old-fashioned music, no rock 'beat', drums, acoustic guitars. The writer Jason Robert Brown is good. Not so acid and sharp as SS but give it time. The two performers, Adam Kantor and Betsy Wolfe were good. She was mike-ed too loud and she starts out pretty loud! The both could perform as well as sing. Where the songs had clear narrative they were very good. They did not ham it up like 'great stars' which was good. That theatre is not large. There was serious talent at work.

But it was a set of songs strung together that seemed to be, wanted to be, telling a story and they failed. What was her problem? Maybe, something about she so demanding because her career isn't as 'big' and she wants more of his undivided attention. In the end I didn't care very much. Beautiful folks with astonishing voices singing in the spotlight to a cheering multitude are not very convincing portraying intimate personal pain. One of the New York myths is that the talented and famous also suffer, no. that we believe they suffer so that when we see them singing about their suffering we can believe it and buy a ticket. But then ignore everything I say when it comes to singing.

Norman Katz thought this was a good show. Why? The female performer, my guess.

### Corpus Christi

Read this Terrance McNally play – finally. Excellent. Jesus and the gang were fags and persecute for it. Grabs me where it hurts. The staging as described sounds terrific.

It follows and glosses the events pretty close re-telling the story very compactly. Leaves out the resurrection but otherwise does have God. McNally has a theological perspective – that we are all have some divinity – so fuck you homophobes – but there *is* still a mysterious supernatural God in at work. Seems he is more or less indifferent.

Very impressive.

### The Big Knife

I was skeptical whether this later (1953) Odets from his Hollywood years would be any good – when he had 'sold out'. Certainly it's not about union guys but it packs a punch about corporate corruption and the power of big money in the Hollywood studios circa 1948. It's a fully realized tragedy – three excellent acts – from an era when they wrote real plays. Excellent writing.

The actors performed without mikes – very impressive.

I'm not saying a lot here – because I'm in a rush – but it was a great evening of serious theatre.

#### Gamma Rays and Man-in-the-Moon Merigolds

Another reading project in NYC. By Paul Zindel. About a rotten and selfish mother who is emotional abusive to her children. Don't read or see much of this idea anymore. I suppose it comes from too traditional a point of view – about the demands of motherhood and the pain of failure. Still it has a light touch at the end – winning the Science Fair gives the young girl faint hope even in the darkness of an utterly miserable home life. Note the trick done with the lighting – the expression of hope is presented in the last spot light of the enclosing darkness.

By coincidence I am reading *Liars Club* for book club, a memoir of another crazy mommy. Thirsty years (of feminism) later the crazy mommy is a lovable free spirit who really didn't affect the child very much.

This play won the Pulitzer in 1971. It is a powerful read.

Zindel also wrote *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little*.

\*\*

Sat aft.

#### The Assembled Parties by Richard Greenberg at Manhattan Theatre Club

A new play – drawing room / family drama but with laughs. Neil Simon all over again. Well wrought. Touching and funny. Great revolving set. But nothing grander than the mother theme – if there is anything grander. Enjoyable. Oh, so accessible. Forgettable?

Sat Evening

#### Happy Birthday – Anita Loos

1946 comedy – another well crafted play – 16 characters – saloon setting – the liberation of the librarian by drink cha-cha-cha. Charming, well done – as deep as a chocolate wafer and twice as sweet.

\*\*

Terra Firma



What can I say?

Alright, alright, yes, they postponed again, for two hours, at the last minute, when I was already 3/4 of the way there .... drama ... drama .... and kept me waiting two more hours .... shut up, shut up .... which I killed in a Food Court in downtown Jamaica, Queens, .... thinking, thinking ... I might be, I might be, no, yes, I am, I am the only white boy in this whole place, and maybe the world .... and wondering if they even know the word for belt or what it does or could do if you had one and where the fuck do I find Bus Q5 and isn't it funny there are like no taxis, like none ... well not that funny, actually.

.... drama ... drama ...

... and finally a gypsy cabbie finds me - Black Crown Royal, leather seats, no markings ... an illegal from Mali, cute but now is not the time ... who believes in the opportunities here in America even though they fuck over the immigrants and in basketball but more in soccer ... where is he taking me .... and that's where 50 Cents was born and there's where the cop got shot last week .... and .... here's the house.

A neat little house ... owned by one of the sisters ... who works in a long term care facility ... the one flooded out in the last hurricane .... who sat me in the cleanest living room ever ... in an ugly arm chair covered in plastic .... and made me tea ...

.... and ... and ...

"Terra's in the bathroom, she'll be out in a minute."

Who is more fair skinned than I thought. Who is quite attractive and who is extremely well spoken. Whose story hangs together. Who is ready to do whatever, except come to Canada ... skype me ... Who spoke to the nanny ... twice ... who wanted to stay ... who wanted to send her relatives to work for anybody Terra knew .... Terra, thoughtful Terra, kindly Terra, who spoke to the agency at the time ... who never mentioned the temporary arrangement was a problem ... Terra, who says she's arranged for Danya Scott to come forward and call my office on Monday.

[cue the music] Terra, who had to rush back back to her job for a famous doctor ... Terra, Terra ... [cue the music ... Chariots of Fire ... yes Chariots of Fire] Terra!

Another cup of tea, Mr Campbell? While we wait for your cute Mali pick up?

And ... and ... on the local train coming back to the city a troop of break dancers performed in my car, on the overhead bars and on the poles, right in my face and without kicking it, to boom box music and chanting ... yo and yo and yo ... and ... and ... didn't even ask for money!!!

Avoid the Express Train and life can be good even for white boys.

CMC,

Browne

I brought lots of Browne material to review. Looking forward to it – especially if Terra really does show up.



New York – April 2013

This is a second trip to NYC this year, unexpected but necessary to meet with Terra Holman, the long missing witness in the Browne file. Hopefully this interview will be smooth on Friday afternoon and the rest of the time I can work on Browne in isolation and see some theatre.

I got luck with timing and connections traveling down and managed to stop by QuikTiks at noon right after getting off the bus from Newark, get to my hotel and then up to Lincoln Centre for a 2pm matinee.

The show was Ann, a bio-monologue of / about Ann Richards the Democratic Governor of Texas, and a folk hero to many feminists. I knew little about her going in, liked her a lot coming out as feisty 'character'. But if there was any political fight she had while in office it didn't emerge. Other than being a woman and a Democratic in Texas and maybe that's enough. Indeed for this audience it seemed that way. She gave the Keynote Speech to the Democratic Convention in ?? '88. The performer, Holland Taylor, was also the writer based on her own research which according to the programme was a lot of interviews.

As a one-woman show it was good. Ann held forth as if giving a commencement address and political pep talk. It was a charming portrait and the audience loved it. Lots of funny lines. ... if you live together and then get married in in Arkansas and then move to Texas and get a divorce are you still brother and sister? ... three dogs about to be 'put down' ... biting ... the third a Great Dane ... rape ... doing my nails and something for my breath ... you go out on a limp because that's where the fruit is ...

But the middle part – Ann in her Governor's office was confused. What was her issue? Not easy to do – hold the stage for almost two hours. The staging, lighting etc. was flashy and effective.

So what does this tell me about 'Eleanor'. Would a one woman show / monologue be effective, especially if you dressed it up? Would it have legs in NYC? Another feminist. There have been ER shows. Would the lesbian angle help or hurt?

The experience – good but not great theatre – but literate and serious – and one of a number of such efforts in town at the moment – rekindled by desire to live here and see lots and write. Perhaps it's affordable. I have no faith I can get an audience in Toronto. There is probably much less chance in NYC but at least there is better stuff to look at. I need to look more closely at Toronto opportunities. At least there I have a better chance of making my own.

Makes me anxious to get Brown 'done' so I can move on.

\*\*

Weather is beautiful, warm though muggy. The people are out in the parks soaking it up.

\*\*

Wednesday evening I saw a new musical – The Last Five Years – really a set of songs, vaguely related, about a deteriorating relationship of a young heterosexual couple – he a successful novelist and she a

not so successful Broadway-type performer. The plot is – they fall in love and then they break up. I don't mind that the reasons for failure are murky - I'm vaguely on his side but only because I don't quite get 'what's her problem'.

There were some good songs, approaching Jacques Brel / Sondheim quality, tuneful with real lyrics and old-fashioned music, no rock 'beat', drums, acoustic guitars. The writer Jason Robert Brown is good. Not so acid and sharp as SS but give it time. The two performers, Adam Kantor and Betsy Wolfe were good. She was mike-ed too loud and she starts out pretty loud! The both could perform as well as sing. Where the songs had clear narrative they were very good. They did not ham it up like 'great stars' which was good. That theatre is not large. There was serious talent at work.

But it was a set of songs strung together that seemed to be, wanted to be, telling a story and they failed. What was her problem? Maybe, something about she so demanding because her career isn't as 'big' and she wants more of his undivided attention. In the end I didn't care very much. Beautiful folks with astonishing voices singing in the spotlight to a cheering multitude are not very convincing portraying intimate personal pain. One of the New York myths is that the talented and famous also suffer, no. that we believe they suffer so that when we see them singing about their suffering we can believe it and buy a ticket. But then ignore everything I say when it comes to singing.

Norman Katz thought this was a good show. Why? The female performer, my guess.

### Corpus Christi

Read this Terrance McNally play – finally. Excellent. Jesus and the gang were fags and persecute for it. Grabs me where it hurts. The staging as described sounds terrific.

It follows and glosses the events pretty close re-telling the story very compactly. Leaves out the resurrection but otherwise does have God. McNally has a theological perspective – that we are all have some divinity – so fuck you homophobes – but there *is* still a mysterious supernatural God in at work. Seems he is more or less indifferent.

Very impressive.

### The Big Knife

I was skeptical whether this later (1953) Odets from his Hollywood years would be any good – when he had 'sold out'. Certainly it's not about union guys but it packs a punch about corporate corruption and the power of big money in the Hollywood studios circa 1948. It's a fully realize tragedy – three excellent acts – from an era when they wrote real plays. Excellent writing.

The actors performed without mikes – very impressive.



I'm not saying a lot here – because I'm in a rush – but it was a great evening of serious theatre.

#### Gamma Rays and Man-in-the-Moon Merigolds

Another reading project in NYC. By Paul Zindel. About a rotten and selfish mother who is emotional abusive to her children. Don't read or see much of this idea anymore. I suppose it comes from too traditional a point of view – about the demands of motherhood and the pain of failure. Still it has a light touch at the end – winning the Science Fair gives the young girl faint hope even in the darkness of an utterly miserable home life. Note the trick done with the lighting – the expression of hope is presented in the last spot light of the enclosing darkness.

By coincidence I am reading *Liars Club* for book club, a memoir of another crazy mommy. Thirsty years (of feminism) later the crazy mommy is a lovable free spirit who really didn't affect the child very much.

This play won the Pulitzer in 1971. It is a powerful read.

Zindel also wrote *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little*.

\*\*

Sat aft.

#### The Assembled Parties by Richard Greenberg at Manhattan Theatre Club

A new play – drawing room / family drama but with laughs. Neil Simon all over again. Well wrought. Touching and funny. Great revolving set. But nothing grander than the mother theme – if there is anything grander. Enjoyable. Oh, so accessible. Forgettable?

Sat Evening

#### Happy Birthday – Anita Loos

1946 comedy – another well crafted play – 16 characters – saloon setting – the liberation of the librarian by drink cha-cha-cha. Charming, well done – as deep as a chocolate wafer and twice as sweet.

\*\*

Terra Firma

What can I say?

Alright, alright, yes, they postponed again, for two hours, at the last minute, when I was already 3/4 of the way there .... drama ... drama .... and kept me waiting two more hours .... shut up, shut up .... which I killed in a Food Court in downtown Jamaica, Queens, .... thinking, thinking ... I might be, I might be, no, yes, I am, I am the only white boy in this whole place, and maybe the world .... and wondering if they even know the word for belt or what it does or could do if you had one and where the fuck do I find Bus Q5 and isn't it funny there are like no taxis, like none ... well not that funny, actually.

.... drama ... drama ...

... and finally a gypsy cabbie finds me - Black Crown Royal, leather seats, no markings ... an illegal from Mali, cute but now is not the time ... who believes in the opportunities here in America even though they fuck over the immigrants and in basketball but more in soccer ... where is he taking me .... and that's where 50 Cents was born and there's where the cop got shot last week .... and .... here's the house.

A neat little house ... owned by one of the sisters ... who works in a long term care facility ... the one flooded out in the last hurricane .... who sat me in the cleanest living room ever ... in an ugly arm chair covered in plastic .... and made me tea ...

.... and ... and ...

"Terra's in the bathroom, she'll be out in a minute."

Who is more fair skinned than I thought. Who is quite attractive and who is extremely well spoken. Whose story hangs together. Who is ready to do whatever, except come to Canada ... skype me ... Who spoke to the nanny ... twice ... who wanted to stay ... who wanted to send her relatives to work for anybody Terra knew .... Terra, thoughtful Terra, kindly Terra, who spoke to the agency at the time ... who never mentioned the temporary arrangement was a problem ... Terra, who says she's arranged for Danya Scott to come forward and call my office on Monday.

[cue the music] Terra, who had to rush back back to her job for a famous doctor ... Terra, Terra ... [cue the music ... Chariots of Fire ... yes Chariots of Fire] Terra!

Another cup of tea, Mr Campbell? While we wait for your cute Mali pick up?

And ... and ... on the local train coming back to the city a troop of break dancers performed in my car, on the overhead bars and on the poles, right in my face and without kicking it, to boom box music and chanting ... yo and yo and yo ... and ... and ... didn't even ask for money!!!

Avoid the Express Train and life can be good even for white boys.

CMC,



Browne

I brought lots of Browne material to review. Looking forward to it – especially if Terra really does show up.

- Washington Theatre - Sept 2013
- I didn't make the trip to Washington to see theatre. I discovered there was a lot of it as researched what to do. And after sampling the three main legit theatres it seems that it is fairly good as New Yorkers would judge such things. Equally or even more surprising is the quality of the theatre buildings. The Arena is a beautiful facility with three theatres, the largest being est. 450 seats plus two smaller spaces. Woolly Mammoth which is supposedly 'alternate' is also in lavish and flexible space. And The Studio perhaps less spacious in lobby department is also new and equally well done with two beautiful small theatres. Lots of money in this town. Nothing in Toronto has had such cash spent since Centre Stage. The audience demographic as observed on three evenings advanced in age with the lavishness of the surroundings. The plays were age appropriate to the demographic.

*Torch Song Trilogy* at The Studio - very well done – good call by whoever that this could be remounted for the straight world something about frustrated love suffered by gays. Thirty years ago this was a tragic and very funny joke. Now it seems it is just confusion and funny but the 'love' in traditional form, possible.

I struggled to remember what parts of this I had seen. The third piece rang no bells. In some ways this was the edgiest. Gay man adopts troubled teen and mother visits, freaks out and he tosses her out.

*Detroit* at Woolly Mammoth is a play developed at Playwrights Horizon in NYC. Billed as a Pulitzer near miss.

The core of the play is fun – two suburban neighbouring couples get to know each other over the back fence – one couple fresh from drug rehab and other on the down skids of unemployment. They fuck up and crash and burn the house down. Wild and funny. But they bracket this with an attempt at social significance – the loss of the suburban life that was 'good'. This was pathetic. There were lobby gimmicks for the audience to pretend to remember suburban life. And some character at the end of the play who comes out and remembers better times. The play shows the destruction of 'the' suburban couple by the druggies not by de-industrialization. The unemployed chap was not blue collar, rather a low level bank employee. It has nothing to do with Detroit. There is no sense of somebody bad upstairs at fault. We are just asked to laugh at these fools. And then there is some ambiguous half-ass renewal and moment of truth for the fallen couple. The druggies have disappeared. Among the actors the male druggie was the most appealing. The emotional meaning thus is liberation by an exotic 'pan' not tragic destruction.



*The Velocity of Autumn* - Arena

This is billed as pre-Broadway. Estelle Parsons performs very well as does Spinella. The relationship of their characters is well written. There are some holes in the 'plot' such as it is – like 'what has set off the old lady's siege?' And 'what happens?' at the end. Is she hospitalized or does gay son move back in? Significant lack of clarity but does it matter to the general audience who will come to see Parson's emote.

Overall – I liked it.

## Out the Window

### Defamation

Big generality – the play I saw seemed fair to the police.

The first thing you need is that it is a fair representation of what happened in court. I can't answer that in a technical way because of the confusion between the trial and the Inquest and because of course I don't know the transcripts. But what I saw stoutly told the cop side of story through their mouths. Was that all direct quotes? The effect was – they did their job are aren't to blame. If that's the overall conclusion it would make it hard for the police to think they could win a defamation action on smaller points of untruth or unfairness.

If anything the play doesn't get across the critique of arrest procedures, dealing with the mentally ill etc.

The tenor of the discussion after was not hostile to the police. What might other discussions be like?

It was not clear from being there – eg audience questions – what was 'true' – what was quotes from transcripts? Which transcripts – trial or Inquest? What about the cop personal histories?

We can discuss the lesser but important defamation issues in more detail as you develop the script.

### MY comments about the play

Change the name to **Witness**. It's a terrific portrait of what it's like to be a witness, to know a moral conclusion and yet to be attacked, the frustration of hearing excuses etc. Why is someone with a political point of view untrustworthy? It's more about the experience of the witness than it is about what she saw 'out the window'.

Consider the related questions – why would you trust the words of a lawyer who's paid by the Defendants – by their Union ??? Why isn't he subject to the same scorn? The expert witnesses? etc

The cx scenes were excellent. Showed how a witness is attacked, undermined and how she felt. Shows the moral invalidity of the process. Doesn't show why we won't send people to jail unless a jury can be convinced based on evidence that passes this test of fire.

The witness / author's rage toward the end was totally understandable. Justified. I offer some comments below that might be taken to excuse the system and point to reasons the author didn't think of. I hesitate to do so because I wouldn't that rage to dissolve into uncertainty.

Consider adding a little locker room humour between the lawyers to show how they (we) can do this and not 'mean it' of the person we're attacking. Just doing our job? Our job in Court is to make you look stupid and biased.



The nightmare scene which opens Act II was no good. I didn't understand it was author's fantasy nightmare until after, maybe never. It seems unfair to me and even offensive. That cops would piss on her?!!! If I were them I'd complain bitterly about that.

Now understanding it's the author's nightmare – and her parallel doubts about what she's doing while she plays out her moral imperative to speak out, that she might get sued, that maybe she's being unfair to cops, does she have the right etc. Rewrite it. Her description of her nightmare as explained to the audience after was much better. Consider more direct comparisons with the nightmares of other people involved in the case.

It is not clear enough what is from the trial and what is from the Coroner's Inquest. And you need to tell what an Inquest is for. To explain and make recommendations. The uselessness of the recommendations is the set up for the author's frustration – that the police do nothing. Leave in the taser part. It shows that the conclusion was that we should help the police get 'control' by violent means.

Cops seemed wooden. Author doesn't understand male bonding etc. Cops are junior soldiers – they'll die for their buddies – honour – they are emotional. The attempt to humanize by the police college story, the security guard arrest etc. fell flat. Were they 'true'?

The back story of the officers – not clear if it was suppose to be true. One well motivated cop and one routine. This part didn't click. Nothing shows the real and sheer panic of being in a life and death situation. It's real. We hear the cops say it in their evidence but it's denial cx mode. The stress backlash of killing someone is there in there again in cx words but it seems to be mocked. No doubt it was real they felt like crap about this. There is reason to feel sorry for them. etc.

Some of the audience did not understand that the story was factual. And part understood that but wanted a fictional story that was more dramatic, ie forget the facts and give fictional internal monologue etc.

The fact there is nothing about Otto Voss's family and Otto himself is telling. The audience therefore knows – as one said – he was a loon. And for many in that audience – that's all it took to excuse the cops. It shows that the fear of the mentally ill is deep. The cops reflect this social prejudice very accurately. Note their locker room take on the mental ill is that 'they go ballistic' It's no more sophisticated than that.

I like that it was all true. Keep it that way. That's what makes it powerful. Perhaps you could add more 'drama' in the author's frustration in hearing all the excuses and evasions of what was/is a serious problem.

Tell more about what happened in the store. The details of why they went there are critical. If they thought he was beat up, why did they appear to be arresting him. Good questions – why didn't they find and call the real witnesses? (As a lawyer, I can imagine sensible and proper answers but what were

the reasons?) If one of those persons says Voss did not strike out – why wasn't that evidence allowed in. Even just reading the statement of that now missing witness? Why is that less admissible than the hearsay evidence of Voss's prior incidents of violence and mental illness. There is a serious moral issue buried here in the laws of evidence that in this case favoured the accused cops. But the Court would probably rule about the same for another type of accused.

If you can tell the jury all about Voss's mental history which the officers didn't know, why can't you give the jury actual witness info.

If Voss wasn't acting crazy when they met him, as they seem to be saying then hammer the relevance of his mental health history as evidence. Compare – a woman's prior sexual history and its relevance in a rape trial. To me, it's very bad to put that history before a jury.

Why did the officers appear to be arresting him? Maybe it was totally irrational to think so? Maybe he did spontaneously 'ballistic'. I handled a case where that happened. What's a cop suppose to do when caught in that trap? Are the techniques for physically subduing someone as described appropriate in the normal course.

It seems Voss did indeed have a history of violence. If the cops knew it, they'd have even more reason to be concerned. Mental health records instantly available wouldn't have made a difference here. It happened too quick. But if they had been instantly available, those records would have told the cops to be very careful of Voss, that he was dangerous.

Did they hit him after he was handcuffed? Not clear and very nb.

You've missed the key piece of legal info – Section XXX 20 or 25 – of CCC allows the cops to use all reasonable force to complete an arrest. It is the cornerstone of the cop defense. Very nb nb. Once they have the grounds to arrest, you don't have the right to resist. Their legal position is very strong. All these trial turn on this. Read some of the case law on what the test means? It is difficult problem for the Court. Many sincere efforts to wrestle with it – played out between the conservative and the liberal on the bench.

Another reason for the writers frustration is the conflict between her moral purpose and the process. A criminal trial is structured NOT to deal with systemic issues like police training. It's about whether the person on trial should go to jail.

But what about the Inquest. It should have been more suited to – 'why' – what can we do to prevent this? etc. Why did the Inquest fail on that front? What recommendations were made to coroner's jury by the Crown? Why is a Crown Attorney in charge? Why was Peter Rosenthal denied status when he tried to join in representing the Committee? Was there any critical perspective presented there? What could be imposed on the cops any obligation to be 'gentle'? What recommendations did the family make? That's the bottom line. Are there better alternatives in arrest procedures? What?

Tell us about the Committee for Otto Voss? Was it filled with crazies?



The little bit about police attitudes was good. The story about the cop? Who scared away the demons for the crazy lady was great. Why aren't there more cops with that kind of savvy? One reason is that they are taught to "take control"? Why? Are they all the type of people who 'take control' by force? Are their better instincts drilled out of them?

The part on reading the police mag was interesting and could be a lot better. Going through such a trial – being accused of killing someone – is hell. Note how strong the cop sense of honour is. Investigate the glamour bestowed on police killed in the line of duty. Who else in society gets that kind of public glory for death in the line of duty? Why? Look at the stats. Who in society per capita etc is most at risk of death in the line of duty?

Why is the cop notion of self so military instead of social work?

Perhaps tell more about Christie B. Her crime reporting is legend. She'll almost always be for the cops. How about dramatizing the confrontation between the author and CB? Let the two women have it out.

I like the fact you dramatized the trick of the cops testifying without their notes. But I think as I write that the Judge's ruling was wrong. Do you know what the notes say?

The stuff about other ways to control is very interesting. One cop talks about the social work dimensions of his job. This is very real. But the bottom line is that cops are still way too military in their attitudes – get control – get the cuffs on.

The Voss case is interesting in that Voss had no weapon. There is serious excuse about the arrestee having a weapon. Why were two then four, young cops having such trouble subduing him? Fitness? Combat training? Street fighting generally. How hard should it be for cops half his age to subdue an unarmed, obese man.

Enough! I'm obviously interested in the issues here. The issue is what does the general audience take away, not a lawyer and a lawyer relatively expert in the field.

The one non-lawyer in my group said she came fearing she wouldn't know enough to be able to understand. But she reported that at the end she didn't feel that way. There's a good sign.

I think the audience left thinking the cops were not 'at fault'. I did. And from everything I know I think that was/is the right conclusion of the criminal trial. But they didn't get beyond – there's nothing we can do. Which is bad.

What conclusions does the author have? Where are they?

My view of the 'problem' lies in the deeper issue of police as military enforcers vs cops as street social workers. Conservative vs liberal. You can see this played out on TV daily. There clearly is reality to the danger of some police work but why is the larger task downplayed, undervalued and underfunded? (Why doesn't Christie B. write about the heroic work of social workers?)