

Theatre Reviews Diary

2016

Cam Baby -Fringe - Jessica Moss - writer producer

Winner of Best New Play

This play was terrible for the first third and terrific for the rest.

About university students and internet privacy, spying etc. Very well constructed and pointed. Not always well acted but never bad. Overall, excellent for their budget.

James I and II Scottish National Theatre, Luminato

Put aside the wow of the Hearn Generating Station in which they inserted a serviceable theatre. Much talk of that.

The plays. The Scots wanted 'history plays' for their famous monarchs. They got two good ones. The second half of James II was not just good - excellent. Good accessible story and a brilliant performance in Act II by the two male leads - a fiery argument leading to a stabbing. 'The king has no friends'. As good as any high drama in Shakespearean canon - others will no doubt disagree. Not poetic but to the bone and accessible. The greatness of Act II does depend on superb performances. Both plays had the same story line - a weak, disadvantaged boy king of Scotland becomes a man and a king - and has to kill and betray his best friend(s) and allies. Charles III is an all round better play but Act II of James II is outstanding. Should I complain that the Scottish brogue is was often impossible? Shakespeare is often impossible. Maybe it's my hearing?

Testament of Mary

SoulPepper - by Colm Toibin Nancy Polk

Good monologue - re-imagining Mary's view of her son. Dour. She's not a believer! Well performed.

Blood Wedding Frederico Garcia Lorca
Soulpepper

David Roffey took me to the opening night of this new Soulpepper production. It was awful. It is very rare to see something bad there. This was all round terrible. There was a new translation which dropped in ill-fitting slang. The set and presentation did not seem Spanish at all. Not Spanish and therefore not hot-blooded. Indeed some

of the supposed histrionic jealousies and passions were comical and the audience laughed. The leads were no sexy to look at. The first part of the play seemed set in Appalachia. The music was hillbilly – bad hillbilly. The overall set design seemed rural Ontario, slate snow fences, not rural Spain. The acting was uniformly painful. Only the last scene of near total tragedy as almost everyone dies was the least bit satisfying. But not fast enough.

A Line in the Sand

Factory Theatre

This revival of a 1996 play by Guillermo Verdecchia and Marcus Youssef was part of Factory's 'recovery' season of outstanding Canadian plays. I knew of it but hadn't seen (I don't think) it when it was produced by Tarragon as part of World Stage.

The performances were superb, three characters, the confused Canadian soldier in the desert war, the Arab teenager and the Colonel who investigates the murder. Maybe riveting.

Leaving the theatre a few questions occurred – like what happened between Act I and II that we that the nice, sort of, confused, soldier got sexually involved and then implicated in the murder of the Arab boy. They didn't matter much at the time, the performance was very satisfying. But next day my doubts arose. Whatever the story was about how the relationship evolved into a racist, homophobic murder, that would be interesting and it wasn't told. My guess is/was that the details were cut in favour of the riveting performance. This I see in NYC frequently when big stars run away with a show and narrative is sacrificed.

The confused issues were not inconsequential – lonely straight boys needing porn, gay (or not so gay) sex, neo-Nazi racism. There were/are big and interesting questions how we get from A to B. If I were just reading this I would be saying it makes no sense that the soldier goes 'queer' and if it happened the really interesting issue is how the racists got involved and who actually killed the boy and who is protecting who. Really not satisfying to leave me guessing. It's a half written play.

But maybe it is Canadian shyness to spell out the sex issues on stage. e.g. the Martha Henry play at Stratford which dodged the sex between older woman teacher and male student.

The plot alluded to an incident in Somalia (??) where Canadian soldiers killed / tortured a teenager hanging around the camp.

Still, it was good to see such outstanding performance.

Gertrude and Alice

Written and performed by Anna Chatterton and Eva
Buddies in Bad Times

This was a Buddies original and very, very impressive. Gertrude and Alice appear on stage talking to the audience about their relationship and literary importance. The performances were terrific. The history lesson was excellent. Hearing some of Gertrude's poems and writings performed and explained was a revelation.

This is world class.

The staging with projections of the salon was cheap and effective.

The program notes supplemented the performance by giving a more detailed history. The characters referred to it as they spoke. This ought not to have worked but it did. It worked because they play was about them telling their own history. (It's an idea how to fill in the details on Eleanor Roosevelt.)

The writing here was outstanding – better than *A Line in the Sand* – and the performances were excellent. I think Gertrude could be improved upon with a better actor but not Alice. She was fab.

Crackwalker - Judith Thompson

Factory

Factory Theatre has a remount of this 1980 play originally done at Theatre Passe Muraille. I hated it then and left at half-time in 2016. (Others call it Intermission.) Four thoroughly down-and-out characters rape, beat, cheat, shout at, lie to, each other. With no apparent meaning, moral, dramatic arc or crisis. There is an Indian spirit dancers prancing around occasionally, why I don't know.

Smart, intelligent actors have a very hard time convincing an audience that they are dumb, illiterate morons.

Buried Child - Sam Shepard - NYC April 2 2016

New Group at Signature

Mary Rowe picked this for one of our theatre dates. It would not have been on my short list because I had seen it in 79-80. But it was entirely worthy of seeing again,

both as an interesting play and because of a fabulous performance by lead by Ed Harris and Paul Sparks as Tilden.

I did not remember the story enough that I knew the ending. This was a New Group production put on in one of the Pershing Square theatres, but not by their resident company, Signature. The facility is top drawer.

The subject is the American family. The play won a Pulitzer. In this variant of the classic theme the family members are nut bars. Funny and tragic. And there is mystery as it slowly is revealed the terrible secret – the buried child, the murdered child, who comes back from the dead in the form of visiting grandson, Vincent, to reek havoc. I honour the play as a memorable explosion of the myth and a story with a fully developed arc. Great writing.

All the actors were excellent, several over-the-moon wonderful. Mother was the weakest, but still good.

Still, I was not thrilled. Everything was right for that result. Why not?

The climax of the play with Vincent's famous temper tantrum smashing liquor bottles didn't work as performed that night, too many of the bottles did not smash. Mother needs to be a sexpot who betrays farm dad and carries on with blithe hypocrisy in good health as he is dying. Amy Madigan didn't get there. Vincent wasn't up to highest level set by Harris and Sparks. Needs to be chilling how you cannot escape family secrets. Shepard wrote a longish speech for him, a critical speech, how he tries to escape, driving across the prairie. It didn't work.

The Humans - Stephen Karam

This play was/is getting reviewed as the best play of the year. Broadway production after a off-Broadway production in the fall.

Irish family has Thanksgiving dinner in number two daughter's basement slum apartment in lower Manhattan. It's a catalogue of all the contemporary miseries of health and employment. And lots more. Some good laughs along the way. Ending is pure misery. A thorough-going tragedy of crash and burn. Whether they'd call it class based, who knows.

Stress on job and health problems are central and give a realistic feel. But how realistic is this – to an audience that paid \$140 a pop to sit there and watch working class misery. An elaborate two story set imitating a basement slum apartment.

Well performed.

A sense of family solidarity survives. You hope at the end that the family sentiment will pull them through. Still a family and they can get back together and pull through. The family sentiment is strong in spite of all the individual tragedies. The message is family pulls us through. In spite of all the problems.

I can't say I enjoyed it. I admired the writer for putting so much true contemporary tragedy into one play and leavening with a few laughs. But the idea of the family as ultimately redeeming wasn't working. Maybe it was deliberate. You just hope it will work. It seems in the past the family has been strong.

My bias is against family as redeeming.

I'd like to see a clearer position on this issue.

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The Humans, is very highly rated by the reviewers. Also very good according to me. Here's another American family falling apart. With a few laughs. This time is less murder and more shitty jobs. Demented decrepit parents of course. On a par with *Buried Child*. But who can top a dead baby.

The Way West

Labyrinth

Sunday night I saw *The Way West*. This time the decrepit mother welcomes her big city daughter back to the family homestead to help out with her bankruptcy. Well, no, she doesn't welcome her. Nor does bad sister. Mom is a washed up pro story teller of heroic women of the 'west', also in psychical and financial ruin. One daughter is a fraudster and the other professional career woman, just as deeply in debt as the other two, only better dressed. The three of them go to hell together (i.e. go bankrupt). Lots of laughs. The garage falls down and the sofa burns. Dad is never mentioned. So no Freudian crap. 'Post-feminist' in the sense that the woman crash and burn all by themselves, without men to blame or as villains. They don't even blame the banks. Their heroism is heedless, wanton and sometimes criminal, financial irresponsibility. Well performed.

This was at Labyrinth Theater, a hole in wall dump of place on Banks St near the river. This theater was Philip Seymour Hoffman's project. The play was originally from Steppenwolf. That was disappointing in the sense that the play was an import, not an original, at my mecca of new plays. I predict you will see it soon on Broadway.

As a connoisseur of family misery I liked it the best ... so far. But the week is young! I'm not even going to try to understand why.

I don't recommend you Google 'great American family drama', unless you want to wallow in it. There you will find a very knowledgeable listing of American family stage misery done in a Time Out article (yes, Time Out) a while ago. It's very smart, with thumb nail plot summaries, a count down of the top thirty stage miseries. As I recall *Long Day* was #1.

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Merrily We Roll Along - Kauffman and Hart

This was a Reading at the Roundabout for theater donors.

The play is a 30s chestnut about theatre people with a huge cast (91 persons!!) completely unsuitable for a reading and they did well with that. It was the basis of the flop Sondheim musical of the same name. The conceit is to tell the story backwards. The last scene is protagonist as an idealistic college student. The first scene is a fandango of high-living theater stars and their vicious jealousies and debauchery. The story is about the lose of idealism. I like the device of reversing the

order. It makes you think a bit. The protagonist is sellout young play write how writes clever comedy, ditches his wife, screws the stars, gets sued, betrays his friends etc.

The reading was well done but I am unsure whether I would warm up to the play. The protagonist is a sell out and rotter. Everybody on stage in Scene one is a social parasite. Is it more likely I will feel sorry for him by hearing his story backwards? The event – the Reading – was very interesting. Full house – 400+ - for a reading? A special event for theater donors. A reading of a play which is really only of historical interest. Roundabout has just raised \$32M of a \$50M capital campaign. !!!!!????!!!!!! New York theater is a different world!

Working Actors' Studio, Improv Class

I was a guest observer at a senior level improv class at this collective/co-op style class. These folks do a monthly show in classic improv style – a few topics to riff on. The class was other exercises to get them sparked on rapid-fire dialogue. They were all excellent, some brilliant. I enjoyed it immensely.

I realized watching that some of what I write is improv created all by me. Some works, some not so well. It would be good to give the structure to such a troupe, and let them improvise a new script within the plot.

The Father – Florian Zeller

Mary Rowe and I saw a preview production of this French play at Manhattan Theater Club. Wed matinee. Starring Frank Langella. A prize-winning play from Paris and London.

Mr. L. was working overtime for the dotty, declining dad in the shameless tear-jerker.

This subject – declining parents – is done to death. And I'm writing about a death-defying matriarch. The subject fits the matinee demographic. I had to see it.

If Mr. L. had not been so good and the play not so well crafted and the production so polished and the theme so prescient - I would have hated it. As it was I just hated the ending – the dotty old man crying in the nurse's arms 'I want my mommy'.

Vomit.

The Royale

This was the 'studio' production at the Mitzi Newhouse theater at Lincoln Centre. Well reviewed. Norman Katz had tickets for that night so I bought in advance and joined him and a friend. It was available at TKTS, $\frac{1}{2}$ price, so not that big a hit. The story was of the first black boxing champ, and how he got a fight with the reigning white champ and the race politics of the fight. A – just getting the fight. B – the outrageously uneven split of the purse C – the significance of the black man winning - D the violent racial backlash – E - his black sister opposing the fight because she foresaw the violent backlash. Big picture – black equality was *hard* won.

The staging was spectacularly good. The stadium seating was a round a boxing ring that could be reconfigured in subtle but effective ways. The play was a mocked up series for boxing matches, very fast moving and visually very effective and entertaining.

The story and moral noted above was told mostly by shout-outs by different characters in ring-corner as the play progressed.

The lead actor as Jack Johnson was terrific – also beautiful, how beautiful. Overall I liked it. Great to watch.

But ... I know there was a literate and sensitive real script somewhere buried in there. A script with a hard and message about racial equality. A fine and delicate tragedy. A script that was turned into a circus performance by a theater and director who thought this was thing to do. Why? Did they think it was a better way to get the message across? Was it? Depends on ... depends on ... who gets to see it. And how their brains work. Fine delicate tragedy isn't everyone's cup of tea.

Like Money in the Bank Jerry Polner
Radical Gags Theatrics

Here's a play about 'the people's' opposition to the founding of the Federal Reserve. Jane Adams, Sidney Hillman and others you've never heard of - except, maybe, maybe, in Economic History 317, or American Politics – Graduate Research Seminar. It's billed as a Romantic Comedy ... because some characters fall in love in the context of their political activism. The plot is so historically pedantic and bizarrely improbable that you can only believe/hope that it must be true. The opening scene is three bank officials under live fire from an angry mob who want their money out of the bank and they don't have it or any because in 1890 there wasn't enough money to fund the growing economy – and they lecture us on how banking (doesn't) work.

I liked the idea of this play for entirely political reasons. My New York days were all about economic history. And theater to get at the underlying economics has to be given a shot. The movie *The Big Short* was a good effort at explaining big banking in a humorous way – humor being the only way to get the attention of most people – it seems.

Alright, an economic history and politics lesson is what's this all about. But I have to say this was a poor lesson. It is a buried fact that the Federal Reserve System is privately owned by – who? And why does it matter? It seems to serve the government interest and be under government control anyhow. At least today. I don't think the play explained the significance of restricting the Federal Reserve assets to government debt. The ancient history in the play is only helpful if it illuminates how all this works today. There is reference to the Wall Street bankers and their role in fight but not enough make the real issues come alive.

The acting was spritely.

Only in the left wing circles of New York would such an improbable play develop. 'Let's make economic history into a romantic comedy! But in NYC improbable is always a hot prospect - 'unhappy barber eats customers'.

Fiddler on the Roof Joseph Stein, Jerry Bock Sheldon Harnick

Mary Brock wanted to see this, I never had, Norman Katz said it was a good production – and away we go. Big Broadway.

I enjoyed Act I a lot and Act II not so much. Production values were superb. Performances were well mic-ed so I could understand almost every word. Which in that barn of theater meant it was a bit wooden and cartoon-ish. Still that was good. Dancing was great. Some of the music is very familiar and it was good to see in context. Audience was hooked, laughing and gasping at all the right moments. A good reminder of the 'point' of great theater (for the masses)

What impressed me was that the show deals well with social and political issues. Father owing his children and how three of his girls break free and how hard – and good – that was. Arranged marriages. Father as the boss of the family and mother as is slave with a sharp tongue. It is presented in the end as tragic that father can't reconcile himself to it.

The issue of Jews versus Russians and the pogroms is the whole point of the second act. This is lightly done with a vague hint of the Holocaust to come in the staging of the final scene. The happy Jews on stage are evicted from their village but they are not murdered. They all seem to setting off for life with relatives elsewhere.

The portrait of Jewish traditional life intrigued me. It was obviously an effort to normalize orthodox life for a non-Jewish audience. And was largely successful. The unhappy role of women was not obscured. My sense was that was dated and unnecessary in contemporary society. But useful forty years ago. Gently done.

Ironbound Martyna Majok - Rattlestick Playwrights Theater

The protagonist is an attractive, woman, immigrant (Polish) with a hard life in America. She is fiercely determined to be independent such that her three relationships with the three different men on stage are endless hard bargaining about very, specific terms e.g. who will cover the co-pay for adult goof-off son, or how much for a car. She isn't very nice but you admire her courage. In romance terms, she is an unvarnished 'bitch'. Also very funny. The three men, very different, try - that she love them and trust them. She doesn't. Well just a little. She is one of the most interesting characters I have seen on stage. She is not sentimental. The redeeming power of love does not win out at the end of this play. She seems completely 'free' of and from romance. With this impassioned exception, she has an adult son, off stage and mostly off book, who is in some trouble and 'bad' in some unexplained way and for the son she sacrifices all. Her son is the only thing she 'owns' and is hers. It is a good example of not telling part of the story working well

in the service of play and its main point. It wouldn't make any difference to the moral.

The actress was fab. Persuasive Polish accident.

Two of the three male characters were male fools. I might have been offended by them if it weren't for the fact the female character was so nasty. The male actors were also excellent.

The politics of this were impressive. The dehumanizing effect of the hard life for immigrants, is there room for love, etc.

The sexual politics were good – from me who is sensitive to male fools. Yes there were two dumb ass male fools – and useless dreamer – all were better people than she was and all were trying in their way to reach her and she rejecting the first two in her stubborn insistence on being independent, and the third because he was too much a dreamer. I like female villains because they are liberated from feminist righteousness. Here is one with great nuance who emerges the other side and has my great sympathy.

This is a great small, play that deserves, and will get, many productions. Let's hope they find as a good a cast.

Familiar Danai Gurira
Playwrights Horizon

Better title - *Guess Who's Coming ... to the Wedding*

Act One is a black family sitcom, extremely well done. Act Two is the twist.

The family is from Zimbabwe, now extremely successful and Americanized. Lawyer and Christian daughter. Professor Mom and Professor Aunt (also a drunk) And rebel daughter, performance artist, just back from a trip to Zim. Wedding for lawyer daughter to white boy aid worker (also Christian) Enter surprise wedding guest, another auntie from Zim. She insists on traditional Shona barter ceremony to formalize the marriage. Which essentially means the grooms family has to pay for the bride in cows. White boy groom has a cute brother who joins the fray.

By all normal standards the Act was extremely funny and well performed. The audience loved it. Off to Broadway, etc. etc.

Act Two gets messy in Gilbert and Sullivan way. Turns out, turns out, Christian daughter is really a niece of the professional couple. They exchanged her when their own was killed in a revolutionary skirmish in the arms of another sister (a revolutionary hero or a very careless mother) so they took the dead mother's daughter of about the same age, as their own. And raise her, very successfully as their own. But ... fake daughter is shocked she has never been told, that she is not really an American. Dad announces he wants to go back to Zim and serve the people. (It is made perfectly clear that while his idealism is nice he will be perfectly useless on the farm and that he should stay home and watch football. And cute white boy brother gets it on with bad girl black sister. Fake daughter reconciles quickly with de facto parents. All is forgiven. Wedding proceeds. Happy ending.

That the audience loved it, is main message here. Extended run.

It is a good play about the clash of cultures – the articulate major premise – and the triumph of 'America's' ability to absorb all – the feel-good minor premise.

It was enjoyable to watch. Acting was sitcom perfect. Staging, lighting etc. perfect. The set was embarrassing lavish. It made a point.

But the next day I was confused – did I see *that* on television or ... I thought I was at America's leading theater for new drama? And there's the rub. Playwrights has evolved or degenerated or grown, depending on your perspective, into a Broadway tryout factory for light comedy. Was it the perfect paly in that the message was so sugar coated you didn't notice. Or was it nothing but sugar?

2016 - Toronto April >

Chimerica Lucy Kirkwood -

Canadian Stage – Directed Chris Abraham

I went because Lucy Kirkwood is hot stuff as a writer. I really liked *NSFW* which was produced by Theatre 180 at the Theatre Centre. I liked it because it dealt with difficult political/cultural issues – ‘feminism’ in an intelligent way. The events in Tienanmen are the subject of this play.

I almost left at Intermission – of a three hour play – but didn’t. Act Two was much better. It was better because the story finally stopped wandering and came into a much sharper focus.

Good things – the multimedia staging was good from start to finish. Lots of journalist photo montage of Beijing which effectively put the very low to the ground events in political context. The revolving stage was used extremely well to tell a very complex story. We seldom see the top grade modern theatre hardware used in Toronto. I didn’t even know Canadian Stage had it.

Bad things – The story was way too complex. The first Act was numbing. Did the revolving stage drive the Director to over the edge into thinking he could put more on stage than he ought. I think of Abrahams as a good Director who likes a fast-paced play. All this fancy hardware was like putting him on speed.

The sound amplification was terrible. They need to do much better there.

I wonder how this play came to be. It is described as ‘epic’. The complexity of the story is on the scale of *Les Mis*. It might be an interesting political novel. *Les Mis* was an unlikely stage production – which worked. But I can’t resist the conclusion that this story is too ‘small’ for all this hardware. I liked that they tried. I couldn’t help think of my version of Eleanor Roosevelt where I conceived that ‘big’ and complex multimedia back-up would allow us to tell a complex personal story in the context of ‘big’ political events.

How was the original production done at Almeida in London. It’s a very small stage. More goods.

The story when it gets to its conclusion is fine. Ideas I liked. The hero was the tank driver who *didn’t* run over ‘tank man’. Tank man’s shopping bags as a symbol of modern China. The protagonist – a archetypical crusading reporter – beating up someone who won’t ‘talk’ and causing their deportation from the U.S.

The part of the story about newspaper politics was well done. The part of the story about ‘tank man’s’ life in China was not so interesting to me. Perhaps part of the failing of the story for me was that the protagonist journalist didn’t have my sympathy. Others might perceive his tale as grandly tragic. For me he was just another vainglorious jerk lustng for the front page. Whatever. Kirkwood was writing about something interesting.

Botticelli in the Fire and *Sunday in Sodom* Jordan Tannahill - Canadian Stage

The first is played for laughs – Botticelli’s model is the Doge’s wife. They fuck a lot. He also has a boyfriend who he betrays to save his ass when the Doge gets mad. Very gay sensibility which went down fine with the establishment audience. Well done.

The second was outstanding. It seems to be an accurate re-telling by Lot’s wife of why she looked back. Mostly a monologue. A clever mix of reconstructing the old tale in a modern context. The angels are UN soldiers etc. I’d say brilliant.

Body Politic - Buddies -by Nick Green

This was so bad in so many ways.

The story of the Body Politic Collective is worth telling. They made clear this was a dramatization, so I shouldn’t bitch about the ‘accuracy’. But it was awful. The old fag protagonist – whose dreams tell the story of the events thirty years ago – is nothing like Gerald Hannan. He never became tired and the thought of him as shy with a young trick is laughable. He could boast about being the oldest hooker in town! The theme of his guilt about never calling the female member of the collective before she died is a total fiction. She – Chris Birchell had moved to BC years before. The portrait of Chris as the leader of the demo after the bat raids is pure fiction. The characters have been created by the writer – and one suspects the dramaturg and director – to suit their purposes for their perceived needs for the theatres demographic i.e. young gay folk. Whether their perception of the market is correct is interesting. The (supposedly) tired old fag has to have a young twinkie trick who is boring and who heroically tries and fails to cheer him up. That’s the only way his story can come out. Aside from the fact that is not Gerald it conception and presentation is offensive as ageist. The male-over of the demo into something lead by a savvy lesbian, aside from the fact it didn’t happen that way, is done to fulfill the perceived need for women as heroes. This is a true and good idea but it is so far from the truth of the history to offend. Is the need for sex balance so overwhelm that we should re-write the history and deny the old fags the honour of their rebellion.

Both the Director and the dramaturg write blurbs in the program that encourage me to blame them for the distortion of the history. Who knows what the young writer would have done on his own. They say as well that the young creators were discovering this unknown history. Obviously so. But why? Something wrong with asking those who actually know to tell the story.

Aside from all that – the acting is bad – shout, shout, shout. Blame the Director. This is particularly bad where the one character who represents the articulate Marxist politico, shouts his rhetoric. O.K. to make a bit of fun that character from that era but ... but ... there were politics and theory and it mattered and that aspect of the era is utterly mangled ... and missing.

The set is barren and modern instead of ashcan. Unforgiveable.

The 'metaphysics of the play – if I can be pompous – are appalling. Tragedy is a noble aim of drama. The play ends with the old fag in misery and dying, unable to relate any more with the younger generation – the twink – having failed to make peace with the woman who lead the demo (the hero of that moment according to the (false) - re-telling) and pining in a most inarticulate way for the old struggle. Thus the men are judged.

History is written by the victors. Given the story told it brings home who were the losers.

Theatre – SHAW - 2016

Woman of No importance Wilde

Here is the one of Wilde's great comedies of the 90s which I haven't seen. It is not a great production, barely fair. And the play itself is odd and to my ethic' unpleasant.

Several of the actors were poorly cast including the lead female, the scorned woman. The *bon vivant* Illingworth, Wilde's voice, should be forty five, not twenty five. 'Updating' the costumes and set to the 1950s made no sense. The set was just not 'country house grand'.

The first act was way to long, but that was not the Directors fault. There were several characters too many for our modern taste, most of our group thought. They were supposedly witty, some actually witty, but they want less, not more. I was no certain on this. I agreed with respect to some of the minor extra characters but not of several others, who served no purpose to advancing the plot but did get of some zingers. I seem more tolerant of plot-superfluous characters who 'talk good'. I like clever talk.

The script is filled with Wilde *bon mots*. Filled. Some sailed, some failed. A Wilde character spouting his witticisms is indeed a pompous character, far, far, from a natural character. Some hate that kind of artificial performance. They probably hate stand-up. It's a series of one-liners that adds to, or amounts to, plot, only if you stand way back. It's also hard with so many characters 'doing it'. Do they all ring true. Between an over-stuffed script, some bad casting and weak performing, one thinks this could be better.

But the play itself and its surprise ending make the problem more, more and greater. In the ending Illingworth gets his comeuppance and prurient morality wins a stinging triumph. Turns out he is a man of no importance. The audience approves – the apparently modern view of men. But that seems so unlike Wilde, for whom loose morals were preferred. With such a serious ending, the witticism seem wrong. They don't shine. They make Illingworth a laughing stock and an object of scorn. It's a difficult ending for Wilde, not one I like. I mean 'like' in the sense of agree with, ethically etc. I think the 'scorned mother' who emerges triumphant is an utterly unreasonable jerk. But that doesn't seem to be the audience reaction. In this respect the play is much like *The Waitress*.

Dance of Death - Strinberg

I thought Strinberg would be dour and nasty. The text of this play certainly would be but the performance was not. Came off like *Who's Afraid of ...* Indeed Albe must have been copying this in part when he wrote seventy years later. A great cast here,

Fiona Reid, Jim Metzon and Patrick Galligan. Martha Henry *directed*. A great domestic brawl of seething hatred. Very few down moments. Though I can't say I loved being there. Not 'thrilled' like a great *VW*. Just impressed.

Master Harold and The Boys - Fugard

This was so good I don't know what to say. It built very smoothly from utterly and purely personal to the interpersonal politics of race and apartheid to a fine tragic ending, very impressive writing. The cast was A+++.

Uncle Vanya Checkov

I was physically uncomfortable and had to leave at the break. So my thoughts are corrupted.

I don't like the play because I don't like what it's about. Lazy, rich, sitting around doing nothing but bitching. Too close to 'at home at the cottage'. The similarities to my play about the rich in the north smacked me hard. The inheritance plot has similarities.

I thought casting a hugely overweight and fast talking Vanya tried to liven the pace in a way not borne by the script. The actor was working the part but he was just wrong for it.

The others liked the production very much. I pass on denunciation and will remember my physical discomfort.

Altogether a good Shaw expedition. Next season under the new Artistic Director doesn't look so good.

STRATFORD - Theatre - Aug 2016

A Chorus Line - Book -

I never saw the original stage production even though I was in NYC in the late 70s. Shame on me but in those days I couldn't afford Broadway. It's justly famous as a great 'show biz' entertainment about struggling dancers melded by a forceful director into a unit, a single great chorus line without stars. The movie and music do this well. But I didn't know about the text. There is a lot of interesting and sometimes great 'talk' about the dancers, by the dancers, about themselves. It is in its origin, the dancers themselves talking about and after rehearsal, transcribed, edited, glossed and dramatized. You don't get this in the movie. And it is monologue material uniquely for the stage. The 'gay' bits were quite moving. I didn't know it was there. The Stratford production brought this out in the Second Act. The gay dancer telling his story was deeply moving. Brilliantly performed. The spurned girlfriend trying to make a comeback was good, but not as great. Still wonderful. But it wasn't just these two monologues that grabbed. Many other times I was close to tears by their struggle and dreams as they spoke, not just as they sang and danced. The famous line 'I can do that' has always been in my head – launched my playwriting non-career.

It is an excellent example of how the musical genre can be great drama not just great entertainment. That's something it's hard to appreciate outside the hothouse NYC theatre scene. We in the provinces don't get it. We see a good 'show' not a great musical drama.

Anyhow, I loved this show. Has to go on the list of all time greats. Gets its ranking for its emotional kick. Maybe I'm just vulnerable to this sentiment with a NY 'reading' on the horizon, as if I were in the game.

That said, there are issues with the production. Seeing the show with my friend Norman Katz was helpful in thinking through some of this.

Norman makes the comment that *Chorus Line* was in its day a risky thing for its open discussion of homosexual characters. (Not 'gay' n those days.) Indeed I wasn't aware of raw this is in the play until I saw this production. This theme more or less disappeared from the movie. Its even more edgy than that. The one great 'gay' monologue is in fact for a 'trans' guy. And it was interesting – a testament to how far we have come – that this audience in 2016 was cheering for that character. This remount isn't dated, it's now the re-telling of history discovering ancient heroes and victims.

The first act has a long sequence starting with the song "Everything was beautiful at the ballet". I did not understand from the song track how this is really an ensemble piece with all the characters telling their unhappy stories of coming to 'Broadway'.

It's vivid and touching. Telling it in this production with very flashy lighting as if this was Broadway show number was a mistake. This group chat actually takes place in a rehearsal hall. Scrap the fancy lighting. And this sequence was the only place where the staging and choreography was less than great.

Lot of good acting but it is an ensemble piece and everyone falls into their proper place at the end.

Overall, wonderful, wonderful.

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Macbeth Directed A. Cimilino

Shame on me again. I'd never seen this performed on stage. (But lots what I see these days is to 'fill in the holes'.) I've seen an African drum and chant version, satires, *Macbird*, Macbeth as warring Wall St. titans, ... This is basic stuff.

Anyhow, it looked like I imagined – a Bolshoi production of Swan Gudenov, with tons of stage smoke, thunder and lightning. The witches looked like Halloween creatures from a Saturday afternoon parade. Ghosts like zombies. A *Macbeth* for thirteen and eighty-five year olds. Very accessible. Director's get credit or blame.

The actors didn't rush their words. Alas, for a few, I wished they could speak a little faster. I fear they couldn't. The actors weren't mic-ed. Alas, many of them could project so I wish had been. Poor Lady Macbeth, looked about seventeen. Better, she, Juliet. Macbeth spent most of the evening with his shirt off. Good visuals. But the guy doesn't have the voice of grand villain. At least not on the big stage.

I think the problem is the play. Famous as it is, it doesn't work anymore. Witches? Maybe back then, but now they have a different meaning- a comic one.

All My Sons - A. Miller, directed Martha Henry, Lucy Peacock

A great theatrical highlight. Wonderful acting.

The play hasn't been well regarded – until recently. Too much of a domestic pot-boiler and plot too complicated. A shadow of *Death of Salesman*. But the politics of business corruption are right in your face and gripping. Seem contemporary to me. The plot evolved alright. Very old fashioned pacing. So what. A good story. A morale. Great performances all round .

Aeneid

This is a 2007 play by a French Canadian, Oliver Kemeid. Program said it had readings and prizes. Director of a company I've never heard of. Other plays. We walked out at the first intermission.

The idea of re-conceptualizing Virgil's poem about the displaced and wandering Aeneas as a modern refugee tale is sound. [Quare – 2007 is early for the current crisis which makes it even more cogent.]

A few good speaker. Too much performance with too little meaning. Nothing I recognized tracked the event of *Aeneid*.

Very disappointing.

John Gabriel Borkman Ibsen –

I enjoyed this with reservations. The characters are the same as *All My Sons* – crooked capitalist dad, trapped son, mother in love the son. Lucy Peacock played both crazy mothers. In both, dad dies. *Sons* is better.

A new translation. I don't know the old one. Some of the 'lines' are so absurd or absurdly sexist that the audience laughed. Was this embarrassing or true to Ibsen's view of marriage as a prison. I'd say he was a primitive 'feminism' except liberation, at least in this play, is into some different love /sex relationship.

Borkman is a capitalist caricature, absolutely mad megalomaniac. A nut case. In *All My Sons* dad is sympathetic, maybe, and certainly a cheery sort of guy. Part of the message is that dad lies. In Borkman dad is stubbornly cold and rotten.

The ending of Borkman is over-the-top melodrama that seems 'wrong' by modern standards.

No doubt revolutionary in its day.

O.K. – I've done Borkman.

Bunny - Hannah Moscovitch

The five of us all liked this new play. It is story – often told directly by the character, Bunny, directly to the audience. It is the story of girl coming of age and growing to middle age. It is confessional. Her series of lovers are on stage with her, high school, college teacher and executive/husband, and Angel, the young hunk of her middle age who tempts her. The complexity of the relationships ring true. Bunny likes sex, maybe to too much and struggles with what is 'right'. There is no finger wagging. I liked the story and play.

I think the play needs another name. Bunny is nickname given by a friend because she seems frightened like a bunny. It's a minor point and doesn't represent much in the story. Lack gravitas.

The ending is, I believe, intended to leave you uncertain how Sorrel (real name) will go forward – sexually promiscuous or no, guilty or no. I don't demand a clear answer. Just that the ending as drafted is weak. I think this is easily fixed. They'll have a great play.

New York - August 21 2016

This trip was planned to see the reading of my play, *Ladies Night at the Forest Bar*. More later.

Waitress

There wasn't much left on the half price board when I got there at noon. The drama's available sounded way to serious for my mood. I had the vaguest notion *Waitress* was well reviewed. Never made such a mindless pick in my life.

About a very skilled pie maker who makes incredibly pies in Joe's Pie Shop. The way her mother taught her. Also, somehow she is a waitress. She has troubles – pregnant, for one. She has a torrid affair with her gyno. She knows it's bad. She has a very bad blue collar husband who takes all her money. Who doesn't work. She has very silly work mates, who sing. And also have affairs with very bad men. Who are even sillier and dumber than their partners. Our pie maker conceives a plan to win a pie baking contest and take the money and run away from her abusive stupid worthless husband. But not with the gyno, who's married and, she tells him, should stay with his wife. Her mean bad husband tells her early in the show he hopes she doesn't love her children more than her husband, like some women do. She is very ambivalent about the baby coming but when it does – she dumps her husband – the audience cheers – and loves her baby girl more than husband – in fact more than anything. The grumpy old man – Joe – who owns the pie shop dies and leaves it to her. Happy ending.

There are some good comic turns by one of the stupid loser husbands for her work mates. But otherwise the performance was third rate. The music was Carol King-ish. (The star, Jessie Mueller played in *Beautiful*), To me the sound was terrible, over mic-ed etc. but I'm distrustful of my aging ears before complaining too loudly.

I admire the skillfully constructed plot and characters put together in an entertaining accessible package for a purpose. The purpose is to show than women don't need husbands, than men are pathetic and children are better.

I believe this is the drift of our evolving job market, relevant skill sets, birthing technology, evolving sexual customs etc. I don't blame the women for thinking this way. Makes sense. This show is cutting edge, telling it like it is.

But I didn't stand and cheer at the end. I was sad.

(It was interesting how, quite by accident this play compliments my own on sexual politics issues. Here were the working class women dumping their useless husbands. In my play the rich women are exploiting the best hunks for their sexual pleasure.)

An Act of God by David Javerbaum

I liked this a lot. God as a stand-up comic. Easy jokes about Old and New Testament God. Nevertheless a smart text. Performed by Sean Hayes, very facile. Audience loved it.

I liked the 'theology' of it. God admits he's made a lot of mistakes. God tells the people that *he* is their biggest mistake. That they should dump him. The stagey ending has God dumped out of heaven and exposed as a human. The staging was a garish Broadway. Suited the show, I think.

(Comparisons to what I'm writing – 'Jesus does Stand-up' are helpful and numerous. Something for another space and time.)

Cats Webber et al

Fun to watch for the great dancing. One song and the rest of music is 3rd rate. Great dancing. Story line? Not. Great dancing.

Ladies Night at the Forest Bar

Sunday am

I have been trying for days to damp my expectations for this 'reading'. Yes, it's NY and, yes, I expect the 'talent' to be way better than Toronto. But it's only a reading. Except ... except ... auditions, a director with a vision, two days of rehearsals??!! Obaid is keen on our general theory - text and Improv all mixed up. I am totally ready for the text to be trashed – I think. I've not been asked a single question. Nobody seems to want me at rehearsals. I knowingly 'gave' it to them to do whatever – 'have fun'. If they trash my very funny text I'll kill them.

Obaid sends me texts and photos which give the impression things are good, that he has a vision.

What am I at the end of this process? What do I say to the performers at the end of the show? Do they even care?

A big part of me likes this separation. Because I feel people who know way more than me are in charge. No hands-on participation for me. Who knows. Maybe Obaid is a klutz. And hes fucking it up. But I wouldn't know.

I have enjoyed Toronto readings immensely. My characters alive is a wow. This should be just as good with some rehearsals.

But the context is so different. This is commercial theatre which doesn't exist in Toronto. What happens next? In Toronto nothing happens next. What I want to happen next is more openings for more readings and a production. That is the hard sub-text.

As much as I can figure, what I want is a great tape of this event which might be a calling card.

Onward!

**

So the Readings. Many comments.

The first Act was to script. And the second which was Improv was close enough to the script that the story was there and the effect of the story pretty much as in the script. There were some Improv scenes which improved the script, some neutral and some worse. The cast was very uneven in skill and impact. Compared to the Toronto reading the women were better and the men worse.

One shouldn't judge a Reading as if the actors are performing. But here they were performing in places, e.g. the men dancing. Wolf and Hans were verbally inept. And they gave a bad performance anyhow because they were way too fat for the part. Even though they had the audience laughing. Wolf was the worst, especially compared to Toronto. Wolf at the barbecue in Act II disappeared into mumbling. That is funny. Hans teaching Prince to swear was botched.

The articulation/reading was poor in places. Woody wasn't loud enough. Prince as a black guy would be a casting mistake I suspect but this actor was not good with his lines. Soft, no emotion. Actors sitting a table reading just reading would do way better. But these actors weren't ready move and speak. Many jokes lost by bad articulation. This is built in weakness of Reading with moving parts.

The problem with all this is that it makes it hard to re-write. I don't have a good sense which jokes just don't work and which were flubbed.

Cinderella's monologue on the shoes which Improv was excellent. Hans and Prince trading places was awful. Prince and all his women was poor. These and other point would probably improve with work but I don't think these actors will ever be good enough.

Good suggestion to move some of Gran/Red/Jack dialogue to the fore help the coherence of that plot.

Audience liked the supportive relationship of the men during Improv and wished more of that for the women. This should be a relatively easy fix.

Hard to follow the shoe farce in a reading. Their efforts at blocking it, were did helpful. I think that part of the story stands. There were no complaints about it.

The Announcer played by a female seemed wrong. Has to be guy. It's always a guy. Bingo!!! It should be a woman. Summonsing the women to extreme pleasures. Re-visit the words. Maybe need adjusting to a woman's point of view. The performer was ok. Would have been interesting that she was allowed to Improv to see what happened.

The Improv scenes that worked well were Wolf and Woody doing guy talk on the children and clearing the air over their long ago with Gran and Cindy's monologue on the two shoes. Less so the group of women sitting around the bar before the men return watching the T.V. and commenting. The ones that didn't were Prince and Hans I think because they were weak actors. Also the first part of the tailgate party. The second half worked better. I think the first part fails again because Wolf and Prince and Hans aren't up to the speaking parts. Wolf at the barbecue disappeared. Hans teaching Prince to swear disappeared. These are dialogue bits I like.

I think a better way to structure the mix of script and Improv would be pick out sequences – wherever in the play – where two actors can riff on each other for a purpose that's relatively clear and part of the story. There are parts of Act One where this could have happened for positive effect and parts of Act Two where it should not. (My original idea to do Blind Dogs for this exercise was right. That play a much more a sequence of scenes for two actors. The idea of play maybe doesn't work for millennials. But the structure is right. I saw a play once put together by Improv performers. Their riff were run together. The play story was stupid. The performers were good. Good story comes – if not first – very basic.

People liked the triangle of Jack and Red and Gran. Introduce that more clearly in an early scene. They like that human love story – alas ending badly. A love tragedy. Interesting. It is contra the deeper meaning of the play. But maybe not. Red and Jack are the last true romance.

I liked Red's rant at the end of Act One. Different than I intended. Better. Red isn't romanticizing some emotional thrill of deserting men – she is regretting and denouncing it. Gran tried to romanticize and Red is rejecting. I had this scene all wrong in my head. This is the correct read. It is also a signal how strongly the audience holds on to 'true romance'. That's alright. It's part of the tragedy.

A lingering issue. Gran as the assassin of the dads in the forest. Trish doesn't like this. Wants to cut it. I like it. Could be a bit tighter.

I wrote Gran to be bad. She sets up Jack to steal the gold and take the fall and fight the war and eventually kills him to get the gold back. But does she really kill all the dads in the fairy forest and dump them a shallow grave. Is she wicked at the mythic level?

I think this is the difference between a funny play and a serious funny play. I set out to write an evil bad Gran. Do it. If anything clarify – Gran is a mythic assassin. Although she covers her tracks by jokes. She uses her own granddaughter to get the gold. She is leaders of the professional women into assisting her to 'get Jack'. The last scene should show her egging Snow and Goldie to work for her to get the gold and kill Jack. She's truly rotten and triumphant.

Early scene - Goldie and Snow come into together and chat with Red and Gran to get thinks going.

General observation - once the actors in a reading get up and starting moving around you start judging the performance and that erodes the evaluation of the play and the parts. Then the errors or perfection of casting intrudes. Second - farce is impossible to do in a reading. The evaluation of it can't happen until well into rehearsals. In this reading the fat actors playing strippers was really funny to watch but the reaction was entirely unhelpful to how the play would actually come off if staged.

**

Interesting and cordial discussion with Obaid this am. I continue to be impressed with him management skill. On a budget no less.

He seems impressed with his experiment. He says he's never done a mix of script and Improv. His sister says he she couldn't tell the second Act was Improv. That's was a good compliment to him.

He liked my idea of 'windows' of Improv throughout the play.

He wonders whether if you did a larger/longer Improv production the Improv portions would stay fresh or would fall into rigid quasi script.

I think it would all become script. My sense is to take the best of the Improv sections and make them script. Another Improv run through should have some windows for the women to riff and get some input.

Obaid's comments on the script / structure:

- he likes the stuff about Gran killing the dads
 - (I think he likes this because the dads deserve to die because they must have been abusive)
- we need some more about Jack at the beginning so that story line is strongly coherent;
- more about women supporting one another
- more about Gran protecting Red from Jack

His general perspective was that Gran was ruthless because she was forced into for some reason - she's the tough one of necessity - she protecting the women - Jack is at fault because he didn't do what he was told re the beans - Jack is too heroic - he's hurting Red -

His perspective heads in the direction of turning the meaning inside out - Gran is no longer bad - she bad but has good reasons and is really good

I like the idea that Gran and Jack have a sharper conflict and that the men and women line up in descending order of wickedness behind them

I like the idea the characters have such complexity - I dislike the extreme form of his idea view - if indeed it goes that far - that Gran is *really* a hero - A Mother Courage kind of vision

Obaid misses the idea that the rich women are bad because they are rich - which is core to my thinking

Everybody missed this - no body commented on it - the play probably needs the women to flash some money

I sense the actors would have liked more about the Jack/Red/Gran triangle - Trish is right - they want the human/love/family angle

Probably the play can contain all these idea - might be a good idea to pose the problem directly - does the historic abuse of the women justify the women turning on the men when they've got the money - if the play sparks debate about this then it's a good play

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All these good ideas beg the question whether to re-write.

Obaid might be interested in a one week production if I re-write.

I don't think I'd put the effort into it for such a small reward. Especially since I can't trust that the acting quality would be up to snuff.

I don't see a Toronto production. Too big a cast.

I'll play with a re-write as a second priority for my own satisfaction.

Could this be a Fringe entry?

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Gut tells me Obaid has been steered away by the politics

When asked reasonably directly whether he wanted to do anything with it he was all maybes - depends on re-write - his ideas of re-write aim toward Jack as the villain and Gran as victim - Gran as the tough protector - abused necessary violence - etc

He never said he liked the play - liked his experiment with Improv

Even if he might proceed it was with 4 day production - really nothing more than class exercise

Theatre - SHAW - 2016

Woman of No importance Wilde

Here is the one of Wilde's great comedies of the 90s which I haven't seen. It is not a great production, barely fair. And the play itself is odd and to my ethic' unpleasant.

Several of the actors were poorly cast including the lead female, the scorned woman. The *bon vivant* Illingworth, Wilde's voice, should be forty five, not twenty five. 'Updating' the costumes and set to the 1950s made no sense. The set was just not 'country house grand'.

The first act was way to long, but that was not the Directors fault. There were several characters too many for our modern taste, most of our group thought. They were supposedly witty, some actually witty, but they want less, not more. I was no certain on this. I agreed with respect to some of the minor extra characters but not of several others, who served no purpose to advancing the plot but did get of some zingers. I seem more tolerant of plot-superfluous characters who 'talk good'. I like clever talk.

The script is filled with Wilde *bon mots*. Filled. Some sailed, some failed. A Wilde character spouting his witticisms is indeed a pompous character, far, far, from a natural character. Some hate that kind of artificial performance. They probably hate stand-up. It's a series of one-liners that adds to, or amounts to, plot, only if you stand way back. It's also hard with so many characters 'doing it'. Do they all ring true. Between an over-stuffed script, some bad casting and weak performing, one thinks this could be better.

But the play itself and its surprise ending make the problem more, more and greater. In the ending Illingworth gets his comeuppance and prurient morality wins a stinging triumph. Turns out he is a man of no importance. The audience approves - the apparently modern view of men. But that seems so unlike Wilde, for whom loose morals were preferred. With such a serious ending, the witticism seem wrong. They don't shine. They make Illingworth a laughing stock and an object of scorn. It's a difficult ending for Wilde, not one I like. I mean 'like' in the sense of agree with, ethically etc. I think the 'scorned mother' who emerges triumphant is an utterly unreasonable jerk. But that doesn't seem to be the audience reaction. In this respect the play is much like *The Waitress*.

Dance of Death - Strinberg

I thought Strinberg would be dour and nasty. The text of this play certainly would be but the performance was not. Came off like *Who's Afraid of ...* Indeed Albe must have been copying this in part when he wrote seventy years later. A great cast here,

Fiona Reid, Jim Metzon and Patrick Galligan. Martha Henry *directed*. A great domestic brawl of seething hatred. Very few down moments. Though I can't say I loved being there. Not 'thrilled' like a great *VW*. Just impressed.

Master Harold and The Boys - Fugard

This was so good I don't know what to say. It built very smoothly from utterly and purely personal to the interpersonal politics of race and apartheid to a fine tragic ending, very impressive writing. The cast was A+++.

Uncle Vanya Checkov

I was physically uncomfortable and had to leave at the break. So my thoughts are corrupted.

I don't like the play because I don't like what it's about. Lazy, rich, sitting around doing nothing but bitching. Too close to 'at home at the cottage'. The similarities to my play about the rich in the north smacked me hard. The inheritance plot has similarities.

I thought casting a hugely overweight and fast talking Vanya tried to liven the pace in a way not borne by the script. The actor was working the part but he was just wrong for it.

The others liked the production very much. I pass on denunciation and will remember my physical discomfort.

Altogether a good Shaw expedition. Next season under the new Artistic Director doesn't look so good.