

Cultural Daily

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Angst Among the Worker Bees in Gloria

Stephen West · Wednesday, March 4th, 2020

Meet Ani, Dean, and Kendra, editorial assistants at a weekly magazine in New York. They're ambitious yet frustrated, smart yet not very hard-working, and they're at the center of Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's sharp-edged dramedy *Gloria*.

The play, which premiered last week at [American Conservatory Theater](#) in San Francisco, opens with Dean (Jeremy Kahn) dragging himself into work with a massive hangover from co-worker Gloria's party last night. He was the only person from the office to attend, he says, and assigns Miles the intern (Jared Corbin) to get him a coconut water. When Ani (Martha Brigham) suggests that's not Miles's job, Dean replies that "this kid should be getting coconut water for a life experience."



Editorial assistants Kendra (Melanie Arii Mah) and Dean (Jeremy Kahn) trade insults in the magazine office. Photo: Kevin Berne.

Then the stylishly dressed Kendra (Melanie Arii Mah) parades into the bullpen of metal desks that form the assistants' work space. She's been shopping and shows off the red stiletto heels she just bought. We soon realize that Dean and Kendra loathe each other, and the first of several overheated, bitchy fights ensues. Lorin (Matt Monaco), the chief fact-checker, marches in to tell them to hold it down.

There's a lot of talking among these twentysomethings, but not much magazine work seems to take place. Kendra goes on a rant about how "postwar glutton babies take all the good stuff" and how the boomers aren't dying off soon enough. They argue about race and privilege. Dean says Kendra is a rich Asian girl from Pasadena who attended Harvard, so that makes her as privileged as a white male.

Soon after, Dean leaves for a meeting with his boss, who's also hung over, and returns from the private office with a plastic bag of vomit to dispose. While he's out, Ani and Kendra paw through his desk and sneak a peek at a manuscript of his own work. Gloria (Lauren English), a 15-year veteran at the magazine, makes a brief appearance and is asked if she enjoyed her party. "Not really," she replies. We realize that these people live in an insanely toxic, status-conscious world.



Lorin (Matt Monaco), the chief fact-checker, tells the magazine assistants to quit making so much noise. Photo: Kevin Berne.

The playwright Jacobs-Jenkins was once an editorial assistant at the *New Yorker* magazine, and perhaps this depiction of office work is accurate. The debut production of *Gloria* at the Vineyard Theatre in New York in 2015 was impressive enough to win Jacobs-Jenkins a Pulitzer Prize nomination.

Still, as I watched this new production, I couldn't help but think it was far closer to satire than truth. As it happens, I was a junior editor at a weekly newspaper in New York long ago, and we didn't treat each other like this at all. If we argued, it was about the paper's coverage, or politics, or whether the Rolling Stones were the greatest rock 'n' roll band of all time. We didn't plot against each other or rifle through each other's desks. (I can hear the millennials' reply: "OK, boomer, that was then. Now shut up.")

In fact, while *Gloria* is set in the publishing business, its real subject is the boundless frustration and angst of these worker bees. Directed by Eric Ting, the talented young cast, with several actors playing more than one role, show how their characters believe they have no control over their careers or even their lives. In the first act, the dialogue is delivered at a breakneck pace. Even the motormouth Kendra admits she's overcaffeinated.

Then everything changes. Without giving away too much, let's just say a catastrophic event occurs at the end of the first act. The second act shows how the characters' lives have changed, whether they were able to move on — and whether they could somehow capitalize on the disaster.



Barista Shawn (Jared Corbin) separates Kendra (Melanie Arie Mah) and Dean (Jeremy Kahn) as they fight with each other at the coffee shop. Photo: Kevin Berne.

In the second act, the minimalist set (by Lawrence E. Moten III) is initially transformed into a counter at the nearby Starbucks, where Dean and Kendra accidentally meet eight months later and discover they are still rivals. Though they try to discuss the past, they end up in another overheated exchange.

The action then moves to a TV production office, where some of the magazine's employees are now working or pitching proposals. Along with the one-liners we get more evidence of how things have changed.

Disappointingly, though, the self-promotion and narcissism on display in the second act isn't as entertaining as the strife of the first.

Gloria runs through April 12 at American Conservatory Theater's intimate Strand Theater, 1127 Market Street, San Francisco. For tickets, call 415-749-2228 or see act-sf.org.

(Top image: Editorial assistants Ani (Martha Bringham), left, and Kendra (Melanie Arie Mah) in the magazine office. Photo: Kevin Berne.)

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