

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Art of Being Bening

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 30th, 2014

Annette Bening and the Geffen Playhouse are no strangers. That theatre has been the scene of at least one of Bening's less enjoyable theatrical sorties (*Hedda Gabler* comes to mind). But let's not blame house; it cannot help what is put in it. That Annette Bening has not shined as a tragedian is no tragedy. Because comedy, people, is what Bening was born to do.

She can make you laugh just by being Bening — and I'm not talking one-liners, which are easy pickings, but of what one can only call core comedy: a performance that stems not from the mouth, but from the whole person. Remember her in the movie *Being Julia*? Bening can raise an eyebrow and make you smile.

Her current stage adventure — a cogent program of four monologues written by the eminent early 20th century writer/performer Ruth Draper — proves the Geffen to be the perfect house for such an intimate affair, not too big for the semi-conspiratorial tone, and not so small that every hangnail gets into the act.

And what terrific material it is. If you think that monologues dating back to the 1920s and 30s might feel a bit musty, think again. Few people have written better ones than Draper, a smart, literate woman with a wicked sense of satire, admired and respected by her peers and by many others who followed. Her own interpretations of these clever social sketches can still be heard on valuable recordings. They are witty, ironic and wise, and beautifully matched to Bening's own sense of style and timing. Her embrace of Draper's societal parodies is delivered in an understated act of bravery couched in Takeshi Kata's delicately suggestive settings, with few props, sly costumes by Catherine Zuber and unobtrusive lighting by Daniel Ionazzi.

She launches the program with "A Class in Greek Poise" that provides not only a solid pre-performance workout for the actor, but chirps its merry way into a demonstration of those patronizing exercise classes for adults that always end up looking like the demented product of some misbegotten finishing school. And here a girlish Bening reveals another surprise: that she can prance and lunge about the stage with a lovely natural grace and still be funny.

Vignette number two is a giddy contrast. This time Bening plays an empty-headed Gilded Age debutante who can't refrain from dancing or talking too much with any beau who'll hang around long enough to listen. She indulges in such blissful unawareness of the inanity of her mile-a-minute prattlings that they grow more breathless and enchanting at the same time. There is skill in the writing, but at least as much in Bening's ability to keep us irresistibly involved.

If you wondered who that debutante might grow up to be, the scene that follows provides the answer. The scatterbrain has morphed into an arch manipulator, middle-aged mistress of all she surveys. Like a confident field marshal brooking no interruptions, she commandeers lunch for herself and three friends at a chic restaurant where they meet for the appropriate social exposure. The gossip careens from waiters, doctors and diets to scandals, hats and turnips with intriguing gastric outcomes.



Here we begin to see a kind of broadening of this conversation with imaginary friends that made Draper famous and demands enormous concentration on the actor's part to not lose track of all the unseen people.

This nifty trick reaches its apotheosis in "The Italian Lesson," one of Draper's most notorious monologues. It's an exploit that calls for plenty of mental agility (and good deal of breath) as a hopelessly overscheduled socialite juggles teachers, servants, children, a puppy, a lover and a relentless ringing telephone with Dante's *Divine Comedy*. That she can't get past the opening lines is no surprise. Her exponential conversations extend to seven or eight invisible characters, most of whom insist on moving about the room. The scene, written with a steady build and focus, rarely feels as improbable as it is — and Bening navigates these straits without a hiccup.



"Ruth Draper's Monologues" is a whole lot of fun that appears effortless, which it is not. Bening directed herself — always a roll of the dice — yet what emerges is a model of restraint and simplicity, taking its cue from Draper, quoted in the program as saying that she "never [tries] to make the things funny. It is invariably incidental, a by-product of the character... The humor of the situation is something the audience finds for itself."

Well and good, but Draper's exceptionalism is the reason why these monologues have survived the passage of time with their vitality intact. It seems vanity and foolishness doesn't date. We may dress and speak differently and have other preoccupations, but the basic conduct — frivolous and faddish — is unchanged. We are still the same self-absorbed, mostly silly people most of the time.

For Bening, who keeps a firm eye on the prize, the whole enterprise is more than uttering words and finding their meaning. It's fusing the two. Hers is the intelligent delivery of human behavior at its most ludicrous.

Is there a finer goal? Can anything be more rewarding than to share with the world what we do best to the very best of our abilities? No one can or should remove Annette Bening's desire to reach out to dramatic roles. But I'll go out on a limb and bet that she's too smart and incisive a comedian to deny herself — and us — the sheer joy of sharing the laughter. If you visit the Geffen, you'll see.

WHAT: Ruth Draper's Monologues

Performed and Directed by Annette Bening

WHERE: The Geffen Playhouse

10866 Le Conte Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90024

WHEN: Now through May 18

HOW: Tickets 310.208.5454

www.geffenplayhouse.com.

\$37-\$77.

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