Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Coen Poem Not

Sylvie · Wednesday, September 25th, 2019

It doesn't take an English lit background to get a mild kick out of the world premiere of Ethan Coen's quintet of one-acters now on view at the Mark Taper Forum. Ethan who, with brother Joel, has given the world some highly touted money-making *noir* films that elicit as much irritation as admiration, has a history, minus Joel, of also writing poetry and short plays.

The ones on display here, directed by Neil Pepe, Artistic Director of New York's Atlantic Theatre Company, a man with whom Ethan Coen has had a long-running professional relationship, are of modest ambition and varying levels of achievement. Taken at face value—as clever minor sketches—they elicit laughs that have roots firmly planted in the soil of television skits. This is not casting aspersions. Heck. What was richer and funnier than the best of Carol Burnett or *I Love Lucy*? These sketches do not achieve that level of entertainment value and one of them, *At the Gazebo*, lacks entertainment value altogether.

I will say this: As his protagonists, Coen heavily favors the overabundance of idiots among us to choose from. What he catches perfectly if superficially is the societal whiff and vernacular of each situation. So if you're looking for an hour and 45 minutes of well-observed, flippantly light entertainment, the oddly titled *A Play Is a Poem* is the show for you.

There are five short one-acts in all, the first of which, *The Redeemers*, serves as the appetizer. It's what happens when two bonehead brothers (Joey Slotnick and Max Casella) in some mountain cabin decide to do away with a nasty dad and are caught short when a third brother (C.J. Wilson) interrupts their ineptitude and stumbles across something they forgot to do. Blood is spilled.

l-r, Joey Slotnick & C.J. Wilson in *A Tough Case*, part of *A Play Is a Poem* at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum.

A detective whose partner died (Slotnick again) hires an incompetent to replace him. The play, *A Tough Case*, meanders around Sam Slade themes with some colorful characters passing through, especially the new partner who has a knack for getting himself in trouble (C.J. Wilson). It offers some nice observations of some last-century shady types, but no cigar. This play stops, without ending.

As mentioned earlier, *At the Gazebo*, set some time in the late 1800s is a piece with an undetectable motive. Carter (Sam Vartholomeos) and Dorothy (Micaela Diamond) are aristocratic types sitting at a gazebo talking. In a great ramble, Carter is recounting his adventures on a trip to

France. His tale ends with an untoward remark that appears to shock Dorothy, whose attention floats off to another suitor. A family retainer, who's done some unofficial sleuthing (Ro Boddie), informs Carter of this. When Dorothy and Carter meet up once more, words are exchanged, but again nothing happens. If there was a point to any of it, I was unable to find it.

Max Casella & Miriam Silverman in *The Urbanes*, part of *A Play Is a Poem* at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Form.

The Urbanes takes us back to more familiar Coen territory as a cabbie (Max Casella) who's negotiating a partnership with a pal about jointly acquiring a medallion, is in shock when his pal decides to back out on the deal. After he turns to a second friend with the same proposal, he discovers how completely he was snookered by the first.

The funniest person here is the fed-up know-it-all wife who saw it all coming (Miriam Silverman) and the deafening noise of a rushing nearby el that interrupts the anger every time that anger is about to explode. These are very familiar types who certainly found the right author.

But the last piece, *Inside Talk*, is the most intimate familiar platform—a movie executive's office and the inane round-robin discussions among that executive (Peter Jacobson), a writer (Sam Vartholomeos) and a pair of hungry producers (Jason Kravits and Saul Rubinek). They're all trying to make deals, no matter how preposterous the material they have to offer. Of the five plays, this one is undoubtedly the best, though not quite as funny as it wishes it were.

l-r, Peter Jacobson & Jason Kravitz in *Inside Talk*, part of *A Play Is a Poem* at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum.

A final word here about the lovely Nellie McKay. She's the unannounced highlight of the evening, a modest artist of rich musical talent who takes on a minor role in one of the plays (Luanne in *A Tough Case*), but absolutely shines when she bridges the fast scene changes between plays with her own original music performed on three vastly different musical instruments.

Nellie McKay, musician, part of *A Play Is a Poem* at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum.

McKay is so fine that, by the end of the opening night performance, she had earned herself a personal round of applause from newly acquired fans. Her business-like demeanor, straight face and unpretentiousness belie a distinguished talent and a long career that includes the release of seven well-received albums and the co-creating of *Old Hats*, an off-Broadway show with Bill Irwin and David Shiner, among her many other substantial accomplishments.

One cannot tout *A Play Is a Poem* as any more than what it is—a kind of throwback to the years before television, when such small skits were still considered worthy theatrical fare. We've had sturdier stuff on our not-so-small TV screens since, let alone on our theatre stages. Because yes, times have changed.

As usual, the actors give it their best, and the simplicity of the settings by Riccardo Hernández, plus the focused lighting by Tyler Micoleau, counteract in their sobriety the overarching expectations of this inflated event.

Top image: The cast of The Redeemers*, part of Ethan Coen's* A Play Is a Poem *at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum.*

Photos by Craig Schwartz

WHAT: ***A Play Is a Poem***

WHERE: Center Theatre Group/Mark Taper Forum, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Dark Mondays. Ends Oct. 13.

HOW: Tickets: $25–$110 (subject to change), available at 213.972.4400
or online at CenterTheatreGroup.org, or in person at the CTG Box Office. Groups: 213.972.7231. Deaf Community: Information & charge at CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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