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Devastating People Depicts Rehab Nightmare

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 8th, 2017

The first 20 minutes of Duncan MacMillan's *People, Places, and Things* at St. Ann's Warehouse after a smash-hit London engagement, display the most bracing collaboration of playwright, actors, director, and designers in recent theatrical memory. At first, it appears we are watching the final act of a revival of Chekhov's *The Seagull.* But the actress playing Nina seems a bit unsteady on her feet. She is slurring her words and lurching as she moves. She slips and asks the actor playing Constantine if he remembers shooting a seagull and laying at her feet "earlier in the play." She catches herself, realizing she has broken the performance's delicate fabric of illusion and then does so literally by ripping down a gauzy back curtain. Immediately James Farncombe's jagged lighting design and Tom Gibbons' heart-throbbing soundscape explode, attacking our senses as Bunny Christie's stark-white, hospital-like set shifts into several different locales at once. With shattering precision director Jeremy Herrin choreographs the actress's subsequent smash-up.

Barbara Marten and Denise Gough in *People, Places and Things.*
Credit: Teddy Wolff

Images swirl and scatter like fragments of a dream, all from the actress's bleary point of view, similar to the staging in *The Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time,* another London-to-New York transplant featuring a set by Christie. Through strobes and deafening backbeats we can barely perceive that she has entered a club, gotten even more drugged out and drunk, and crash landed in a rehab center where a patient is ranting in the reception area. As the inebriated thespian—we eventually learn her name is Emma, or is it?—Denise Gough launches into a tour de force monologue, pleading with her mother on her iPhone to dispose of all the drugs in her apartment while battling to stay conscious.

Denise Gough and Barbara Marten in *People, Places and Things.*
Credit: Teddy Wolff

The remainder of this harrowing play's two hours lives up to this devastating beginning. Without sentiment or shame, MacMillan leads us on Emma's soul-churning journey to sobriety, realized with daring imagination by Herrin and his inspired team. The story is told through the actress's eyes and when she sneaks a hit of cocaine or endures the agonies of withdrawal we feel it too as Christie's elastic set breaks apart and the lighting and sound recreate her altered sensibilities. The clear-eyed script is refreshingly cliche-free. Emma is not a noble victim or a valiant warrior, she's nasty, difficult, and too clever by half, fighting her therapist and fellow recovering addicts every

step of the way. Most rehab stories end with the protagonist as either a tragic corpse or an energized saint. MacMillan takes the more realistic middle path, depicting the messy steps to becoming a functioning human being.

Gough who won an Olivier Award for her London liming in this role, brilliantly portrays the whirling kaleidoscope of Emma's psyche—her distinct intelligence, her narcissism, her defiance of the 12-step program, and finally, her vulnerability as her last defense is dropped and she must confront the underlying causes of her excesses. The rest of the ensemble is equally incisive, especially Barbara Marten who creates three distinct women—Emma's doctor, therapist, and finally in a devastating turn, her unforgiving mother. Later this season, Gough will recreate her Harper Pitt in the Broadway transfer of the National Theater's *Angels in America*. If this performance is any indication, it should a dazzler.

Oct. 26—Dec. 3. St. Ann's Warehouse, 40 Water St., Brooklyn, NY. Tue—Fri 7:30pm, Sat—Sun 2pm & 7:30pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. $46—$71. (718) 254-8779. www.stannswarehouse.org.

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