

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

There is No Failing in This Trying

Sylvie · Tuesday, September 2nd, 2014

Plays with only two characters, or two-handers as they're called, are always tricky. Too often predictability is the problem (unless it happens to be the point; more on that as we go). It is also easy for the action to sag, or even vanish, or for the verbal exchanges to lose luster and stall. In short, the field is narrowed by the character restrictions, and the dangers multiply.

In the current production of *Trying*, a two-hander now at Long Beach's International City Theatre, predictability is a given and playwright Joanna McClelland Glass knows it. But instead of avoiding that fact, she embraces it. What makes this play such a jewel is that it also embraces the honesty of its autobiographical origins with a good deal of subtlety, economy and a respect for the truth — a truth that underlies both the characters and the action.

It helps that the play involves the playwright herself and the few months she spent working for Francis Biddle, the [American](#) lawyer and [judge](#), who was U.S. Attorney General during [World War II](#) and who served as the primary American judge at the postwar [Nuremberg trials](#) among his numerous distinguished accomplishments.

By the time the 25-year-old Glass caught up with Judge Biddle, he was 81, in poor health, yet still in possession of a fiery (if slightly failing) mind and an explosive temper mostly caused by his growing frustration with a changing world and his own increasing physical limitations. The play's well-chosen title honors all the meanings of that word. It is a loving yet unsentimental portrait of the ravages of age from the benign point of view of a very young woman who would come to admire and respect the man, but who also has to deal with his mostly irrational outbursts.

A simple story, yes? An old one, too. But not everyone is a budding, smart and determined writer on the one hand, a fading but still determined legal and political lion on the other. While Biddle is mostly holding on by his fingernails, his new secretary, Sarah Schorr (the Glass stand-in), has to face with composure the volley of warnings and unearned accusations born of Biddle's irritation with the previous candidates who tried — and failed — to fill her position, including one who nearly burned down the building while attempting, as Biddle keeps reminding Sarah, to turn on the aging office heaters he now won't let her touch.

Tony Abatemarco as the blunt and impatient Judge Biddle is convinced that his new assistant will be as witless as her predecessors. The actor does an exceptional job of giving us the man's moral anguish and physical aches, as he confronts what he knows are the precious few remaining weeks of his life. His meticulous observation of the physicalities of age, married to the slight hysteria of what he knows is an approaching death, coalesce into a beautifully understated performance.

As Sarah straight and tall, Paige Lindsey White brings her own controlled brand of fire and intelligence to the role. Her careful yet unapologetic self-containment combined with Abatemarco's bluster deliver an exquisitely calibrated *pas de deux*. Each is essential to the other.



The entire affair is performed on a well-conceived and lovingly detailed single set (JR Bruce is the designer) in which every prop is true to the late 1960s (kudos to prop masters Patty Gordon and Christopher Briles), from the Dictaphone machine, the manual typewriter and its carbon copies, to the musical bridges (think Simon & Garfunkel) and the radio announcer's selective news of the day. Director John Henry Davis deserves all kinds of credit for having picked his actors well and for not overlooking any item that might contribute to making this production as delectable as it is.

The Canadian-born Glass did go on to become the playwright and writer she aspired to be, with many distinguished plays, books and screenplays to her name, including, on Broadway, *To Grandmother's House We Go*, championed by none other than the formidable Eva Le Gallienne, and *Play Memory*, staged by director Harold Prince, which received a Tony® Award nomination.

To enjoy *Trying* requires no background reading (although you may find yourself wanting to know more about Judge Biddle after the fact). It is the honesty of the characters created by Glass that draws us in and elevates the discussion. The dialogue is mostly comprised of the diurnal minutiae with which both characters are dealing that makes the play's achievement all the more remarkable. While the character of Sarah (i.e. Glass) is key, the playwright restricts us to knowing only a few salient features about her. Sarah discovers she's pregnant while in Biddle's employ, but when he asks her if she's happy, she delivers just one tearful line in response. It tells us all we need to know.

This, you see, was never intended to be about Glass or Sarah the stand-in, although it could be. It is a writer's affectionate tribute to the Biddle she came to know and work for. It's all that matters — and it shows.

WHAT: *Trying*

WHERE: International City Theatre, Long Beach Performing Arts Center, 300 East Ocean Boulevard, Long Beach, CA 90802

WHEN: Through September 14

HOW: Tickets \$42-\$47, available at the ICT box office or at 562.436.4610 or online at <http://www.ictlongbeach.org/>.

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