Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Faith Healer Heal Thyself

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 17th, 2019

Brian Friel is the kind of misanthropic and poetic playwright who speaks to me: elusive, eloquent, hiding somewhere deep behind the words. Yet the words tell us a great deal, even when they're more numerous than is wise, given today's addiction to brevity, and more meandering than makes concentration easy. His 1979 play *Faith Healer*, now receiving a searching revival at the Odyssey Theatre, under the direction of that theatre's Founding Artistic Director Ron Sossi, is a reminder of how attractive and intractable all that introspection can be.

It also is the first in a series of planned revivals of some of the Odyssey's greatest hits, in celebration of this survival theatre's 50th anniversary.

Faith Healer is a work of interconnected soliloquies, spoken by the itinerant and accidental faith healer (or con artist) Frank Hardy (Paul Norwood) who is filled with agonizing self-doubt, his unhappy wife Grace (Diana Cignoni), trying hard to live up to her name and breeding, and failing hard, and Frank's pragmatic alcohol-saturated Cockney manager Teddy (Ron Bottitta). Teddy lets us in on how complex and demanding his job can be, serving such an unpredictable master, and yet he persists.

We're looking here at all the sadness contained in our human comedy. Hardy is a deeply tortured man who acknowledges that he can tell when he won't be able to perform his miracles, yet once healed ten people in one fell swoop—a triumph that surprised him and that he could neither explain nor repeat. It only increased his insecurities, leading to a fateful failure that may have cost him his life.

The format is an uncommon one that Friel used some 15 years later in his three-character play, *Molly Sweeny*, also delivered as separate monologues that require an audience to pay close attention, since most of the action lies in the telling of complicated recollections and relationships.

Rose Malone's somber and moody lighting of Stephanie Kerley Schwartz's spare, not to say stark setting for *Faith Healer*, consisting of a platform and a few melancholy chairs, makes such concentration all the more difficult to achieve. Yet all three actors deliver nuanced performances on the power of Friel's vivid language, the ramifications of which vary widely from one character to the next. Each is a distinct portrait, with Norwood's Hardy exhibiting all the weariness that his terrors and failures of nerve have inflicted on him every moment of his rumpled existence.

Diana Cignoni as Grace in Brian Friel's *Faith Healer* at the Odyssey Theatre.

Cignoni, as his once lover and wife, shows us the fading traces of her earlier dignity and education, even as she grapples with trying to understand why she sticks with such an unpromising and unsatisfying lot as Hardy, while Bottitta's Teddy, thickened by drink, more or less explains it all to us, at the same time that he cannot explain his own unfulfilling devotion to such a dubious prophet.

Ron Bottitta as Teddy in *Faith Healer* at the Odyssey Theatre.

Faith Healer is a chamber piece, its anxieties kept in check by Sossi's firm hand. It also suffers to a degree from the length and deep dive of each discourse, plus the gloom in which all is performed. But such convolutions are in the Irish DNA. If you're a Friel fan, as I happen to be, try it. It will offer the rewards only such a recalcitrant master as Friel can deliver.

Top image: Paul Norwood as Frank Hardy in Faith Healer *at the Odyssey Theatre.*

Photos by Enci Box

WHAT: *Faith Healer*

WHERE: Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles CA 90025.

WHEN: Wednesday,8pm: 5/8 ONLY;Thursday, 8pm: 4/18 ONLY.
Fridays, 8pm: 4/19, 4/26, 5/3 & 5/10;Saturdays, 8pm: 4/20, 4/27, 5/4 & 5/11;Sundays, 2pm4/21, 4/28, 5/5 & 5/12. Ends 5/12.

HOW: Tickets $32-$37, available online atwww.OdysseyTheatre.com, by phone at (310) 477-2055 ext. 2. "**Tix for $10**" available Friday, 4/26 ONLY.
Discounts at select performances are available for seniors, students and patrons under 30; call theater for details.

PARKING: $5 in the Odyssey Theatre lot or on surrounding streets.

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