

Cultural Daily

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Family and Friends: Cost of Living, Napoli, B'klyn

David Sheward · Thursday, July 13th, 2017

Two new Off-Broadway plays exemplify trends in dramas about family and social relations over the past 57 years. Meghan Kennedy's *Napoli, Brooklyn* at Roundabout Theatre Company's Laura Pels space, echoes theater of the era of its setting—1960—when the stage was dominated by autobiographical memory pieces depicting creative, free-spirited offspring longing to escape dysfunctional parents. Martyna Majok's *Cost of Living* reflects 21st century attitudes featuring rootless, lonely protagonists, craving to create family units of their own. Both have credulity-stretching flaws as well as moments of tenderness and honesty, but Majok's *Cost* rings the truer of the two.



Katy Sullivan and Victor Williams in *Cost of Living*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The title refers to the price we all pay for human connection. The four characters are two seemingly unrelated pairs whose only link is that both are composed of a caregiver and a disabled person. Eddie pleads to aid his former wife Ani, still recovering from a devastating accident which shattered her spinal cord and cut off the lower portion of both legs. Jess, a seemingly capable young woman, takes on the difficult task of bathing and grooming John, a graduate student with cerebral palsy. As the two connections are formed, we discover that the able-bodied Eddie and Jess are just as needy as, if not more so, than their charges.



Gregg Mozgala and Jolly Abraham in *Cost of Living*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The fiery-tempered Ani vehemently rejects her separated spouse's advances to care for her, but Eddie reveals his aching fear of being alone. At first, it appears John is the dependent party while Jess is the flinty survivor, but a romantic misunderstanding shows she is the desperate one. Majok subtly depicts this delicate push-pull quartet with only an occasional slip into melodrama. Her realistic dialogue includes razor-sharp, self-deprecating barbs for Ani and John, both played with flair and snap by real-life disabled actors Katy Sullivan and Gregg Mozgala. Victor Williams reigns in Eddie's painful feelings of isolation just as Jolly Abraham keeps Jess' sorrow at bay, hiding it with a bluster of self-reliance. Only in the touching final moments do we see how broken these two are.

Director Jo Bonney achieves a perfect balance of pain and laughs, wisely underplaying both

elements. The most affecting scenes are the simplest, involving baths and showers as Sullivan and Mozgala unflinchingly reveal themselves and their characters at their most vulnerable.



The cast of *Napoli, Brooklyn*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The family in Kennedy's *Napoli, Brooklyn* is equally vulnerable, but the play containing them feels a bit too familiar. The Italian-American Muscolino clan could be right out of central casting from a midcentury, kitchen-sink drama—brutal, abusive father Nick, long-suffering mother Luda, and three daughters itching to escape their Park Slope flat. Tina quit school to go to work in a tile factory to help support the household. Vita is at least out of the house, but imprisoned with nuns after physically defying Nic. The youngest, 16-year-old Francesca is discovering her lesbian identity and plans to run away with girlfriend Connie to bohemian France. Kennedy paints her people and the friends surrounding them in blacks and whites. Luda is too understanding and Nic is too monstrous to be believed while the young women are all a clichéd hue of earnestness; there are not enough shades of ambiguity.

The first act sets up the various conflicts of the family as well as those of Connie's father, an Irish butcher with an unspoken attraction for Luda, and Celia, Tina's African-American co-worker. Then a *deus ex machina* literally falls out of a sky—there was an actual airplane crash in the neighborhood in 1960—which transforms everything, but not really. In the second act, there is the traditional big dinner scene where almost all the characters are rather unbelievably brought together and their hidden tensions come boiling to the surface without much provocation. In the final scene, Luda delivers a big, wisdom-packed monologue as all the struggles are resolved way too tidily and all loose ends are tied up.

Despite the script's flaws, director Gordon Edelstein delivers a flavorful staging with the feel of a close-knit neighborhood (Eugene Lee's homey set creates the right lived-in atmosphere and Ben Stanton's lighting and Fitz Patton's sound effectively conveys the shocking crash.) Alyssa Bresnahan wisely underplays Luca's saintly benevolence and adds a dash of astringent wit. Michael Rispoli, largely trapped by Nic's nasty excesses, plays him mostly as an ogre, but the actor occasionally shows the man's divided heart. Lilli Kay (Tina), Elsie Kibler (Vita), and Jordyn DiNatale (Francesca) capture the daughters' devotion and dignity. Fine cooks, but a too-routine recipe.

Cost of Living: June 7—July 16. Manhattan Theater Club at NY City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: 100 minutes with no intermission. Running time: 100 minutes with no intermission. \$79. (212) 581-1212. www.nycitycenter.org.

Napoli, Brooklyn: June 27—Sept. 3. Roundabout Theater Company at the Laura Pels Theater/Harold and Miriam Sternberg Center for Theatre, 111 W. 46th St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 7:30pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$79. (212) 719-1300.

This review previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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