

Cultural Daily

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Fractured Narratives: Suicide, Cambodian Rock Band, Molly Brown

David Sheward · Wednesday, March 11th, 2020

Fractured narratives are featured in two recent Off-Broadway offerings depicting how families of severe trauma victims cope—or don't—with their personal tragedies. Three generations of suicidal depression play out simultaneously in Alice Birch's *Anatomy of a Suicide* at Atlantic Theater Company after a run at London's Royal Court, while Lauren Yee's *Cambodian Rock Band*, at Signature Theater Company following multiple regional stagings, traces the Khmer Rouge's brutal legacy on a former rock musician and his daughter. In both plays the storyline twists and turns, sometimes even shatters, occasionally resulting in confusion, but mainly inducing the unsettling, disturbing effects of their respective sources of psychological damage. These are not comfortable pieces of theater, but they are affecting and memorable.



Carla Gugino, Ava Briglia and Celeste Arias (background) in *Anatomy of a Suicide*.

Credit: Ahron R. Foster

Anatomy of a Suicide's title gives it away. Someone is going to take their own life, but who, how, when, and why are the main questions Birch addresses in a series of short, jagged and moving vignettes. Three different women appear to be headed in the same self-destructive end. Director Lileana Blain-Cruz divides Mariana Sanchez's blue-tone, aquatic-themed, open set into three areas where the storylines transpire. Jiyoung Chang's lighting and Kaye Voyce's period-specific costumes help to differentiate the locales.

On stage right, there is Carol (Carla Gugino in a shattering performance), who opens the play in a staggered, disoriented state, attempting to explain to her loving husband John (sweet, supportive Richard Topol) why she slit her wrists and then flooded the house while laying in an overflowing bathtub. Center stage, a similar dialogue occurs between drug-addled Anna (devastating Celeste Arias) and her doctor boyfriend (Vince Nappo in one of many effective roles). On stage left, a slightly different scene emerges with the apparently stable fisherwoman Jo (quirky, fun Jo Mei) getting her hand stitched by brush, officious Bonnie (Gabby Beans, wondrously suppressive swirling emotions). Over the course of an intermissionless 100 minutes, we learn Carol, Anna, and Bonnie are mother, daughter and granddaughter, united by genetics and an incompatibility with life.



Gabby Beans and Jo Mei in *Anatomy of a Suicide*.

Credit: Ahron R. Foster

It's not always clear who is who. It's hard to follow the plot when a good chunk of the dialogue is spoken simultaneously. Some scenes are bafflingly obscure and others unconnected—for example, Bonnie's attendance at a colleague's birthday party adds nothing to the story. But thanks to a strong cast and Blain-Cruz's firm direction, intentions and emotions are clear enough to convey the individual meanings of these fragments and painfully tell a harsh, unhappy tale of generation-spanning depression.

Lauren Yee also plays with narrative in a genre-defying style in her *Cambodian Rock Band*. Like *Anatomy of a Suicide*, it's not clear at first whose story is being told. The action opens with the titular musical ensemble singing a selection of hits from the indie group Dengue Fever who combined Cambodian rock and pop with Western music. Once the action proper starts, we find ourselves in Phnom Penh in 2008 where American-born lawyer Neary is working on bringing a major figure in the notorious Khmer Rouge to justice. Her father Chum, a Cambodian refugee, arrives unexpectedly and attempts to persuade her to drop the case and return with him to America. There's also a mysterious narrator, who, like the Emcee in *Cabaret*, is charming and entertaining but we soon learn he represents the evils of a corrupt government. Is the protagonist Neary, Chum, the narrator, or the band itself?



Joe Ngo and Francis Jue in *Cambodian Rock Band*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The pieces of the puzzle are eventually assembled when we flash back to 1975 and the younger Chum, the leader of the rock band which played at the beginning, is imprisoned and tortured in a concentration camp run by the narrator, Duch. When the Khmer overthrew the ruling Cambodian party, all Western music and ideas were banned, but when Duch finds out Chum is a rock musician, they develop an odd, symbiotic relationship.

Yee's structure is more conventional than Alice Birch's, though she does break the narrative wall by having Chum and Duch argue over whose story is being told. It turns out each of them is equally the main character as Yee develops the objectives and subtext of both prisoner and captor. Neary and Chum's bandmates are not as well realized, but overall, this is a fascinating combination of political drama and rock concert with precise, varied direction by Chay Yew who perfectly balances the musical and theatrical elements. Joe Ngo and Francis Jue deliver complex portraits of Chum and Duch, each peeling away stereotypical layers of victim and villain, finally emerging as men of ambiguous motives, manipulated by the powerful forces of their tragic country. The music is exciting and pulse-pounding, played with intensity by the cast members.



Beth Malone in *The Unsinkable Molly Brown*.

Credit: Carol Rosegg

The new version of Meredith Willson and Richard Morris' upbeat musical *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* from Transport Group at the Abrons Arts Center, would seem to have little in common with the previously reviewed Off-Broadway shows about suicide and torture. But it also plays with narrative, in that Dick Scanlan, author of the new book and lyrics, has totally reshaped and offered different perspectives from the 1960 original which won a Tony for Tammy Grimes and an Oscar nomination for Debbie Reynolds for the 1964 film version. The original was Willson's follow-up to *The Music Man*, a variation on *Annie Get Your Gun* and a precursor to Jerry Herman's "Big Lady" tuner *Hello, Dolly* and *Mame*. Molly was based on the brassy, up-from-nothing socialite and

survivor of the Titanic who was larger than life and, in the show, burst into song at the drop of a hat. Scanlan has incorporated Molly's progressive activism for unions, women's suffrage and immigrants' rights into the tried-and-true romance trope with J.J. Brown, her just-as-ornery love interest.

At times, Scanlan's book feels more like a stuffed-with-issues PBS documentary than a musical comedy, but there's enough pizzazz and pathos to qualify it as an entertaining tuner. Kathleen Marshall manages to keep the action and choreography flowing across decades and continents and Beth Malone is a joyous firecracker in the lead. Darren Aron Damane is a virile J.J. and there are valuable contributions from Paula Leggett Chase, Coco Smith, Nikka Graff Lanzarone, Michael Halling, and a host of triple-threat chorus members in this buoyant revival.

Anatomy of a Suicide: Feb. 18—March 15. Atlantic Theater Company at the Linda Gross Theater, 336 W. 20th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: one hour and 45 mins. with no intermission. \$76.50—\$96.50. (866) 811-4111. www.ovationtix.com.

Cambodian Rock Band: Feb. 24—March 22. Signature Theater at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: two hours and 25 mins. including intermission. \$35—\$65. (212) 244-7529. www.signaturetheatre.org.

The Unsinkable Molly Brown: Feb. 26—April 5. Transport Group at Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand St., NYC. Tue—Sat 7:30pm, Sun 3pm (check website for additional performances or changes). Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. \$75—\$85. (866) 811-4111. www.ovationtix.com.

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