Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Gays Across the Decades: Inheritance, Young Man

David Sheward · Wednesday, December 4th, 2019

Every generation or so since the late 1960s, a new play encapsulating the gay experience opens in New York. *The Boys in the Band, Torch Song Trilogy, Love! Valour! Compassion!*, and *Angels in America* have defined their respective gay moment and how the general society is reacting to it. Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance* is the latest theatrical chronicle of the American gay journey. The massive work checks all the right boxes for a certifiable hit. A smash production in London complete with Olivier Awards, glowing reviews and snob appeal, an epic two-evening running time of over seven hours, a fluid, funny, clever production from director Stephen Daldry, and moving, intense performances. The play itself, inspired by *Howard's End*, E.M. Forster's classic novel of connection and redemption, is a mixed bag of brilliant moments of pathos, insight and observation, as well as extraneous, melodramatic and forced scenes.

Samuel H. Levine, Kyle Soller, and Andrew Burnap in *The Inheritance*.
Credit: Marc Brenner

Lopez does not slavishly adhere to Forster's original text of Edwardian class conflict in pre-World War I England. He used the plot template of the liberal Schlegel sisters and their interactions with the conservative, ultra-rich Wilcox clan to explore where we are as a culture and how gay men have adjusted to the aftermath of the AIDS crisis, marriage equality, and the resurgence of a homophobic political agenda from the right. There is much to savor here, but there are plenty of bumps and rough stretches along the way.

Kyle Soller, Samuel H. Levine, and John Benjamin Hickey in *The Inheritance*.
Credit: Matthew Murphy for MurphyMade.

The play begins simply, then Lopez and Daldry skillfully develop and build the perspective into a deeper, more complex view. The casually-dressed cast is seated around Bob Crowley's bare set scribbling in notebooks as if in a creative writing class. A figure dressed in 1910s style (Crowley also designed the subtly appropriate costumes) emerges. This is Forster himself (played with elegant understatement by Paul Hilton) offering his advice to the next generation of gays on constructing their narrative. The actors address the audience, finishing each other's sentences, and tell the fraught story of empathetic political activist Eric (wonderfully sincere Kyle Soller) and self-destructive writer Toby (overacting Andrew Burnap), a couple whose connection parallels the battle between self-love and self-deprecation many gay men endure. There are a plethora of subplots, but the central thread concerns the duo's relationship to the wealthy, covetous Henry

Wilcox (solid and shaded John Benjamin Hickey) and his more compassionate partner Walter Poole (also played by Hilton). Also figuring prominently are narcissistic actor Adam and pathetic hustler Leo, both enacted with precision and variety by Samuel H. Levine.

Lois Smith and Samuel H. Levine in *The Inheritance*.
Credit: Matthew Murphy for MurphyMade.

For every emotionally impactful punch, such as the devastating Part One finale where Eric encounters the ghosts of AIDS victims in a parade of stolen lives, there is a superfluous segment such as an endless debate on the values of camp. Another example is the late-Part-Two cameo of the only female character, Margaret. While her monologue relating the death of her son from AIDS is shatteringly written and sensitively played by the magnificent Lois Smith, it does not convey any new information or insight, and the character feels tossed in out of left field. None of the minor characters are fully developed and Toby's long spiral downward after achieving success with a supposedly autobiographical novel and play is melodramatic and over-the-top, particularly as played by the hyperventilating Burnap. Yet, *Inheritance*'s strengths outweigh its shortcomings and Daldry's well-paced, versatile staging makes the marathon length fly by.

Kristine Nielsen and Aidan Quinn in *The Young Man from Atlanta*.
Credit: Monique Carboni

Horton Foote's *The Young Man from Atlanta*, now playing Off-Broadway at the Signature Theater, also examines gay characters, though only peripherally and through a totally different lens. Premiered in 1995 at Signature and revived on Broadway in 1997, this Pulitzer Prize winner reflects the attitude towards gays of the era of its setting (Houston in 1950). The queer figures are not even on stage, one of them has committed suicide, and they are only important in how they affect straight people.

The main struggle is that of bragging businessman Will Kidder (bluff but vulnerable Aidan Quinn) and his flighty, sweet wife Lily Dale (simultaneously tragic and comic Kristin Nielsen). Several months after the mysterious death of their only son Bill, they are confronted by the unwelcome visit of the title character, Randy, Bill's much younger roommate. Will does not want to see Randy, but Lily Dale craves his company as a reminder of her child. While the word gay, queer or homosexual is never even spoken and Randy remains offstage, it's clear he and Bill were in a relationship and neither parent can face the truth. This unmentionable secret is but one of many problems confronting the Kidders. Will loses his job just as they move into an expensive new home (Jeff Cowie created the period-perfect suburban 1950s set) along with Lily Dale's stepfather Pete (subtly tender Stephen Payne).

Aidan Quinn in *The Young Man from Atlanta*.
Credit: Monique Carboni

The play has some clunky structural problems. The first scene is all exposition with Will pouring his life story out to a young co-worker (Dan Bittner). Later, Pete's great-nephew Carson (Jon Orsini) who just happened to be living in the same Atlanta boarding house as Bill and Randy, conveniently comes to call. But like *The Inheritance*, the production overcomes the script's flaws. *Young Man* honestly examines American middle-class morays of equating wealth with happiness

and unflinchingly rips away the prosperous facade of the couple's elegant existence as they must confront economic and emotional reality. Michael Wilson, who has helmed many previous Foote plays including the epic *Orphans' Home Cycle*, delivers a heartfelt, straightforward staging with an impeccable and moving cast capturing the quiet desperation of Foote's lonely family, detached from their gay son.

The Inheritance: Nov. 17—March 1. Barrymore Theatre, 243 W. 47th St., NYC. Part One: Wed 1pm, Thu—Fri 7pm, Sat—Sun 1pm. Part Two: Wed 7pm, Sat—Sun 7pm. Running time: Part One: three hours and 15 mins. including two intermissions, Part Two: three hours and 10 mins. including one intermission and a brief pause. $39—$199 per part. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

The Young Man from Atlanta: Nov. 24—Dec. 15. Signature Theatre Company at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue—Fri 7:30pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: two hours and five mins. including intermission. $35—$55. (212) 244-7529. www.signaturetheatre.org.

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