

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Grim and Rosy Views of Aging: Storm, Fern Hill plus Gloomy Sunday

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 25th, 2019

Reality is a slippery proposition in the plays of French dramatist Florian Zeller. In both *The Father* and *The Mother*, the title characters are lost in a maze of conflicting and confusing circumstances. So is the audience since everything is seen via the protagonists' perceptions which are altered by dementia or mental illness. Zeller's latest work, *The Height of the Storm*, translated by Christopher Hampton, is now on Broadway at Manhattan Theater Club's Samuel J. Friedman Theater, after hit runs in Paris and London. Here the skewed perspective is doubled and perhaps trebled since we seem to be viewing the story through several different lens. Until the very end of its brief but absorbing running time, we're not entirely sure whose eyes we are looking through and even if it's the same point of view, since the perspective shifts several times. The result is a disturbing, unsettling portrait of how we deal with—or don't deal with—death. Director Jonathan Kent is a reliable guide on this labyrinthine journey of the mind. An expert cast lead by acting legends Jonathan Pryce and Eileen Atkins provide the necessary signposts to lead us to the heartbreaking conclusion.



Jonathan Pryce and Eileen Atkins in *The Height of the Storm*

Credit: Joan Marcus

In the stylishly appointed kitchen of an isolated country house (Anthony Ward designed the attractive set), eminent writer Andre appears unable to accept the recent demise of his strong-willed wife Madeleine. His two daughters, Anne and Elise, are down from Paris for the weekend to sort through his papers for publication and to persuade him to move to a retirement community. But then Madeleine walks in and maybe it's Andre who has really passed away. And who's the mysterious woman arriving for tea? Is she a former lover of Andre's or his best friend's? Is the silent man standing in the hallway a real estate agent trying to sell the house or Elise's new boyfriend? All of these scenarios are possible as timelines crisscross and overlap. Kent's seamless staging, aided immensely by Hugh Vanstone's mercurial lighting, keeps the flow and balance of Zeller's poetic, distorted script just right.



Eileen Atkins and Jonathan Pryce in *The Height of the Storm*.

Credit: Hugo Glendenning

Without a masterful ensemble, this *Storm* would be all thunder and confusion. Fortunately, the cast is rock-solid in its pursuit of objectives and perspectives, though those may change from moment

to moment. Pryce captures Andre's desperate attempt to comprehend the dark new world in which he finds himself. He is like a man cast adrift, clinging to whatever shreds of information he can. Atkins conveys Madeleine's steely practicality and iron will as well as her tenderness towards Andre. Amanda Drew as Anne has the challenging task of providing the closest thing to an anchor of reality in a hall of illusions. She fulfills her assignment with compassion. Lisa O'Hare gets across Elise's conflicted emotions over her parents' plight while Lucy Cohu and James Hillier lend resonance as the mysterious visitors.



John Glover, Mark-Linn Baker, Ellen Parker, Jodi Long, Jill Eikenberry, and Mark Blum in *Fern Hill*.

Credit: Carol Rosegg

While *Height of the Storm* gives an unflinching, brutal look at the aging process, Michael Tucker's *Fern Hill*, at 59E59 Theater, after premiering at New Jersey Repertory Company, offers a rosier slant on the same subject. Once again, we are in a well-appointed kitchen of a country house where the mature occupants are facing difficult life choices (designer Jessica Parks is responsible for this elegant eatery). But this time, the solutions are relatively easy and the outlook is full of fun and mirth with only a few bumps in the road. The house belongs to writer Jer and painter Sunny. This weekend they are hosting two other couples—rock musician Billy and educator Michiko, and fellow painter Victor and photographer Darla.

Sunny proposes all six move into the farmhouse together and care for each other in a commune situation as they face their “golden years.” The only fly in the idyllic ointment is Jer, who can't accept the possibility of the scheme working and whose marriage to Sunny is crumbling due to his infidelity. Tucker, best known for his acting on the *L.A. Law* series, has a knack with funny and realistic dialogue and the issues he is tackling are certainly vital, but he ties up all conflicts and ambiguities a bit too neatly with a second-act group therapy session where all the characters are able to express their emotions like psychological experts. The realities of eldercare are addressed a bit too glibly as well. When Victor, the eldest member of the group at 80, requires serious rehabilitation after hip replacement surgery and his wife Darla is conflicted about attending an important gallery showing of her work in Vienna, the problem is resolved with a minimum of fuss and messiness, unlike in real life.

It's an easy, entertaining evening capably staged by Nadia Tass and played with wit and verve by a veteran cast led by Tucker's real-life wife and frequent co-star Jill Eikenberry as Sunny and Mark Blum as Jer. John Glover as Victor, Jodi Long as Michiko, and Ellen Parker as Darla also have moments of comic splash and dramatic pathos, while Mark-Linn Baker's free-wheeling Billy provides the play's highlight with an enthusiastic monologue on the proper way to prepare pasta with clam sauce. If the best part of a play about aging is a recipe, the cooks have missed the mark.



Christian Strange, Sadie Scott, Ruby Frankel, Zane Pais, and Juliana Canfield in *Sunday*.

Credit: Monique Carboni

Jack Thorne's *Sunday* at Atlantic Theater provides another gathering of friends, but at the opposite end of the age spectrum. A group of twentysomethings meet on the day in question for a monthly book club discussion, drink too much vodka, and reveal their insecurities and emotional wounds. Shy, lonely Marie (a weirdly magnetic Sadie Scott) has just lost her publishing internship while her more confident roommate Jill (vibrant Julianna Canfield) is moving ahead in the same industry and

has a solid relationship with wealthy Milo (appropriately smarmy Zane Pais). The group is completed with Milo's friends, Keith and Alice, neither of whom are sufficiently developed (Christian Strange and Ruby Frankel try their best to give some subtext, but they're not given a lot to work with). There's also Bill, (ingratiating Maurice Jones), Marie's downstairs neighbor who might have a crush on her.

Thorne, a Tony-winning playwright for *Harry Potter and the Lost Child*, provides some intriguing insights into the group dynamics and it's refreshing to hear a play where young people are discussing literature and politics. But too much of the action consists of the friends moaning about their lack of passion and direction—a flaw the obnoxious Milo finds with the books they read. “This is all self-pity,” he bitches about Anne Tyler's *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant*. He could have been talking about the play. In addition, Alice acts as a third-person narrator for huge chunks of time, removing us even further from the characters.

Obie-winning director Lee Sunday Evans enlivens this mostly flat material with propulsive direction and choreography. She has the actors vigorously dance out their suppressed emotions during scene breaks which turn out to be more involving than the spoken dialogue. Fortunately, the final scene gives off a few quirky sparks. After the party has dispersed and everyone has left Marie alone, Bill comes upstairs and clumsily attempts to seduce her. The dialogue is strange, off-kilter, and charming. Sadie Scott and Maurice Jones dance a delicate, push-pull tango that's lovely to watch. So this was not an entirely wasted *Sunday*.

*The Height of the Storm*: Sept. 24—Nov. 17. Manhattan Theatre Club at Samuel J. Friedman Theater, 261 W. 47th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7pm, Thu—Fri, 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: one hour and 20 mins. with no intermission. (212) 239-6200. [www.telecharge.com](http://www.telecharge.com).

*Fern Hill*: Sept. 19—Oct. 20. 59E59 Theaters, 59 E. 59th St., NYC. Tue—Fri 7pm, Sat 2pm & 7pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: two hours including intermission. \$25—\$70. (646) 892-7999. [www.59e59.com](http://www.59e59.com).

*Sunday*: Sept. 23—Oct. 13. 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: 90 minutes with no intermission. \$66.50—\$86.50. [www.ovationtix.com](http://www.ovationtix.com).

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