Cultural Daily

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Historic Meetings: One Night in Miami, Little Wars, Falling Stars

David Sheward · Saturday, February 6th, 2021

When I was a kid back in the 1970s, PBS used to run a series called *Meeting of the Minds.* Created, written and hosted by the comedian-writer Steve Allen, the show brought famous figures from history together to exchange ideas. While the series has been largely forgotten, the genre lives on with numerous plays and films throwing prominent personages in a room and seeing what happens. Caryl Churchill's *Top Girls* is probably the most effective of this type of amalgam debate play because the discussion between time-tripping characters was a springboard for the protagonist's conflict. Two new examples of this kind of fly-on-the-wall, what-if drama aren't as successful or imaginative as Churchill's fascinating work, but they offer some sharp insights.

Kingsley Ben-Adir (left, with camera), Aldis Hodge, Eli Goree, and Leslie Odom, Jr. in *One Night in Miami…* Credit: Patti Perret/Amazon Studios

One Night in Miami… (Amazon), a film directed by Regina King and based on Kemp Powers' play, differs from Churchill and Allen's imagined encounters in that its main gabfest actually took place. On Feb. 25, 1964, boxer Cassius Clay (soon to be renamed Muhammad Ali), civil rights icon Malcolm X, singer-songwriter Sam Cooke, and NFL star and actor Jim Brown met in a Miami hotel room to celebrate Clay's underdog victory over Sonny Liston to become the world heavyweight champion. Powers, who also adapted the screenplay, conjectures what transpired behind closed doors and produces a heartfelt, intense dialogue on the state of the African-American community as the fire of racism threatens to send the country past the boiling point. The only problem, despite intense naturalistic performances, is the characters come across as talking points rather than real people. The conflicts feel forced by the author rather than arising naturally from the situation.

Leslie Odom, Jr., Aldis Hodge, Kingsley Ben-Adir, and Eli Goree in *One Night in Miami…* Credit: Amazon Studios

The engine of the plot is that Malcolm X (a subtle and fiery Kinglsey Ben-Adir), having persuaded Clay (a bouncy, lion-like Eli Gorree) to join the Nation of Islam, wants to convince Cook (Leslie Odom, Jr. fitting the bill admirably both dramatically and musically) to employ his musical talents in the fight for racial justice. The presence of Jim Brown (smoldering Aldis Hodge) is not central to the action. His dilemma of choosing between the gridiron and a career in action pictures does not bear much weight. However, Hodge does provide the most powerful moment in the film. In a prologue establishing the character and conflict of the four men, Brown visits an older white man

(Beau Bridges in a devastating cameo) who appears to be a great friend. After covering the visitor with praise for his football prowess and treating him like an admired hero, the older gentleman rejects an offer by Brown to help move some heavy furniture. “You know we don’t allow n*****s in the house,” the host nonchalantly explains without altering his gracious demeanor. The moment, captured with economic precision by director King, is shattering in its encapsulation of casual racism. Bridges’ off-hand delivery of the shocking line and Hodge’s repressed reaction speak volumes.

Other than this and few other excursions, Powers does little to expand the setting beyond the play’s small motel room. King does provide visual variety and a keen tension. There is much to treasure here, but by shifting the focus to a battle between Malcolm X and Sam Cook and shunting Muhammad Ali to the sidelines, this *Night* misses the knockout punch.

(Top row): Catherine Russell, Linda Bassett, Juliet Stevenson, Debbie Chazen, (bottom row) Sarah Solemani, Natasha Karp, and Sophie Thompson in *Little Wars*. Credit: John Brannoch

Steven Carl McCasland’s *Little Wars* is another *Meeting of the Minds*-type gathering, more imaginary than *Miami* and more stagey and stiff. This single-set piece, presented in a Zoom reading available on Broadway HD, fabricates a dinner party hosted by Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas in 1940 France, a country teetering on the brink of disaster as the Nazis advance to cross the border. Guests include fire-breathing playwright Lillian Hellman, caustic wit Dorothy Parker, wry mystery writer Agatha Christie, and the enigmatic Muriel Gardiner, supposed by many to be the model for Hellman’s childhood friend (possibly imaginary) in her bestselling memoir *Pentimento* and the subsequent Oscar-winning film *Julia*.

Stein and Toklas have invited Gardiner to their country home at the foot of the French Alps to aid in her secret missions to smuggle Jews out of Germany while the other famous writers just happened to be in neighborhood, I suppose. The lesbian couple’s young housekeeper Bernadette may also need rescuing as secrets swirl around the hosts and guests. Hellman and Stein growl at each other while Christie and Parker crack wise and Toklas hovers maternally. The script is mostly an excuse for literary references, biographical tidbits and some debate. Like Powers with *Miami*, McCasland attempts to address weighty issues as each character must examine her humanity as the Nazis almost literally arrive on the doorstep. Also like *Miami*, the situation and conflicts here feel contrived at times such as Hellman and Stein’s nasty cat fight.

It’s clear that unlike *One Night in Miami.., Little Wars* is meant to be a fantasy since such a dinner party never took place. It’s frothy and occasionally amusing, but not particularly deep. McCasland barely scratches the surface of several intriguing themes such as the nature of storytelling and the illusive quality of truth.

The acting is the highlight with moments of spunk and spark from Juliet Stephenson’s vinegary Hellman and Linda Bassett’s lionness-like Stein (Bassett previously played Stein in the 1987 film *Waiting for the Moon*). Sarah Solemani has a refreshing simplicity as the enigmatic Gardiner and Natasha Karp provides riveting pathos as Bernadette, particularly as she relates a harrowing anti-Semitic experience. Catherine Russell is a warm presence as Toklas, Sophie Thompson is a wry Agatha Christie, and Debbie Chazan’s Dorothy Parker is martini dry. Hannah Chissick’s subtle direction mines the maximum wit and drama from a forced premise.

Peter Polycarpou and Sally Ann Triplett in *Falling Stars.* Credit: Paul Nicholas Dyke

Another form of combining the artifacts from the past into a pastiche entertainment is the musical revue. *Falling Stars*, a new two-person diversion, also available for streaming on BroadwayHD, draws its inspiration from an obscure songbook found by creator-co-star Peter Polycarpou in a

London antique shop. Along with Sally Ann Triplett, Polycarpou celebrates familiar melodies from the 1920s such as “What’ll I Do” and “Tea for Two” as well as glittering curios like “When It’s Night-Time in Italy, It’s Wednesday Over Here” and “Your Lips Tell Me No, No, But There’s Yes, Yes in Your Eyes.” These evergreen tunes, lovingly crooned by the cast of two, were composed in the immediate aftermath of a devastating pandemic and now a hundred years later, they comfort us during another one.

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