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Isabelle Huppert in a Murky Mother

David Sheward · Wednesday, March 20th, 2019

French playwright Florian Zeller managed a rare feat in 2016. He made dementia a compelling topic for a Broadway play. After hit runs in Paris and London (the latter in an English translation by Christopher Hampton), Zeller's *The Father* provided a stunning New York vehicle for Frank Langella as an elderly man slipping into senility and Doug Hughes' staging sleekly provided the realization of Zeller's vision of a world gone mad as seen from the title character's point of view. The author's earlier play *The Mother* follows a similar template with reality and delusion clashing for a female lead who perceives both her husband and son deserting her. The American premiere Off-Broadway at the Atlantic Theater Company (also translated by Hampton) features French actress Isabelle Huppert in a compelling display of emotional unbalance, but in Trip Cullman's pedestrian production, the effects come across as gimmicky rather than disturbing.



Isabelle Huppert and Justice Smith in *The Mother*

Credit: Ahron R. Foster

The brief play opens with the elegant Huppert, smartly dressed by costume designer Anita Yavich in a gray day dress, perched on a mile-long ultramodern white sofa in Mark Wendland's spare set, reading a book. Her husband (*Law & Order*'s Chris Noth) enters and she passive-aggressively accuses him of adultery as he prepares to leave for a business seminar in Buffalo (Huppert pronounces it "Boof-alo" in a nearly impenetrable Gallic accent). She also complains about being left alone all day, her distant daughter, her son's failure to call her and the son's hideous girlfriend.

For the next 80 minutes, scenes are repeated several times with startling variations so we don't know what's going on. Is her son (a laid-back Justice Smith) staying in his old room after a breakup? Is the girlfriend (a spunky Odessa Young) lurking outside? Or is she the husband's new mistress? Or is she a nurse wearing six-inch heels to appear menacing in a psych ward where the mother is losing her marbles? It gradually becomes clear that most of the action is in Huppert's head. While this confusing replay of scenes was compelling and terrifying in *The Father*, with *The Mother* it all seems pretty inconsequential and confusing. The main character is selfish, grasping and demanding. Huppert does her best to make her interesting. Her perfectly timed delivery of darting insults to the husband, her neurotic possessiveness of the son, her rapid descent into madness—all work towards filling in the undeveloped woman Zeller has drawn, but not enough to make us care about what happens to her.



Isabelle Huppert, Chris Noth, and Justice Smith in *The Mother*.

Credit: Ahron R. Foster

The men are pale shadows compared to Huppert. Both Noth and Smith come across as sleepy props for Huppert to emote against. Noth has no chemistry with his leading lady and fails to establish a strong center and Smith's character requires him to appear as if he has just woken up from a long nap and never really shakes it off. Young gets to show a flash of fire as the embodiment of the mother's fears. As a younger woman who could be her rival for both son and husband as well as the threatening nurse, Young creates a genuine sense of danger and fear, qualities sadly lacking for most of this pale *Mother* which is like a rough draft for the much stronger *Father*.

March 11—April 13. Atlantic Theater Company at the Linda Gross Theater, 336 W. 20th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 8pm. Running time: 85 minutes with no intermission. \$101.50. (866) 811-4111. www.ovationtix.com.

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