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Jackie Unveiled – a Kennedy bio at the Wallis

R. Daniel Foster · Thursday, March 15th, 2018

Playwright Tom Dugan remembers a boyhood affinity that he had for Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. The American icon made "everything she did look so easy," he writes, despite her heart-rending past. But what if Kennedy, he continues, had "the same fears, insecurities, and faults, as the rest of us?"

Turns out, Jackie had those emotions in spades; a predictable summation given what history threw at her. This is the Jackie train wreck that Dugan and actor Saffron Burrows gives us in the first half of *Jackie Unveiled*, a solo performance playing at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts in Beverly Hills.

Alone at home with plenty of pills and booze, the character nearly doesn't make it to the second act, given she's swallowed copious amounts of both. We know of course that Jackie will get there (if her cigarette habit doesn't do her in as well) — she just has to wade through a thicket of emotions. As the play begins, the death of Robert F. Kennedy, her brother-in-law, has just been announced on the news. Jackie takes the phone off the hook to avoid calls — from friends, family or the "jackals" that forever circle her orbit, feeding on an ill-fated life.

Dugan structures his theatrical biography as a confessional: the character's need to tell a room packed with strangers about her tortured psyche pierced with unimaginable memories.

"Will you do that for me? Will you be my confessor?" pleads Burrows, approaching the audience. Kennedy, of course, would never have done this. It's a fact that turns the cheat into an effective device.

Saffron Burrows stars in Jackie Unveiled

A front row seat to history

When the character later references her husband's many infidelities by asking, "Would you have left him? Would you have given up your front row seat to history?" the audience seems to lean in en masse, given that they now possess a facsimile to that front row seat.

At times, Burrows' performance morphs into something worthy of a Jackie clone, both in physical appearance (the 1960s wig helps) and in temperament. The cadence of her affected Jackie-fied accent (minus the whispery quality which doesn't project well in a theater) takes a bit getting used

to, but it’s not hard to imagine that the character herself, were one to meet her, would as well.

Jackie Bouvier Kennedy Onassis, to sum up the character’s past with all four of her names, always seemed equal parts iron and velvet. Assisted by pale pink walls that back the performance, Burrows easily showcases Kennedy’s frantic fragility. The very fact that she survives to appear in the second act — set during an evening in 1994 when Kennedy is 60-something — is iron enough for this writer, who’s grateful that she didn’t also have to experience the death of her son, John Kennedy Jr., as well.

Jackie’s rage

There is rage here — a few moments of it, but I wanted more, and not just of the Scotch bottle-toss-against-the-wall sort. The emotion is both expressed and told about (Aristotle Onassis invites Kennedy to let it all out on the deck of his yacht one night). If the play is indeed a confessional, take us to those dark depths wherein psyches become undone in moments witnessed by none — except now, a roomful of strangers. Burrows’ performance came close to the edge. My wish: push her over. Few if any can wholly relate to Jackie’s life; more than a few can relate to inconceivable tragedy.

The unsettling undertones of the play remain this: given the confessional storytelling and the audience’s fascination with such larger-than-life characters — aren’t we all then transformed into those jackals that Kennedy despised so thoroughly? And those names — jackal and Jackie — they’re so similar, perhaps offering a dark clue as to the kind of fated pacts we unwittingly enter into during life.

After intermission, we meet a mature Jackie, and the play warms nicely. There are more memories — *Jackie Unveiled* is essentially built upon them. Here, the character recalls her own husband’s death, wisely reserved for when Jackie has the maturity to broaden the picture.

Where to place an assassinated husband-president?

“Where should I put Jack?” Burrows as Kennedy asks more than a few times, partly in reference to a photo collage she’s constructing that helps her not to drink. It’s a great line written by Dugan, in that we all know the answer: there is no place to put such a horrific memory. And when Burrows takes us into a shower to rinse off all that Dallas blood, a scene she compares to a Hitchcock movie, she finds a piece of her husband in her hair. Unimaginable — just like the Kennedy family history.

Dugan shoehorned five years of Kennedy research into his play: film footage, dozens of biographies, CIA and Secret Service records and interviews with Jackie’s friends and acquaintances. His thorough compilation shines through in a well-rounded portrait.

Director Jenny Sullivan gives Burrows plenty of stage business — solo performances can tend to traffic in them. Here, they are apt given a woman beset by furies, harpies and those ever-present jackals. Costumer designer Marcy Froehlich clothes Burrows in blue silk pajamas in the first act, a nice intimacy — and a headscarf and a rather bulky, ill-fitting red pantsuit in the second act.

The theater as a church

Francois-Pierre Couture’s set, replicating a Fifth Avenue apartment, is dutiful to the style; toys are

scattered about to remind us of sleeping children down the hall. A reproduction of a Claude Monet painting from his Rouen Cathedral series is placed front and center, above the living room's ample entryway. It's conceivable that Kennedy owned the original; perhaps Dugan turned that up in his research.

In any case, it's an apt placement for the Monet painting. Confessionals happen in church.

At the play's start, lighting designer Jared A. Sayeg slowly targets a Kennedy campaign hat placed on a coffee table to remind us that this is how it all begins: the candidate's wife, an accessory who soon becomes the main act.

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Jackie Unveiled runs through March 18 at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts.

Tickets.

Photos: Kevin Parry

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