

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Junk, Illyria and Actually: Bombast and Subtlety

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 22nd, 2017

“Nobody knows what any of this shit means!” cries one of the characters in Ayad Akhtar’s gripping play *Junk*, now at Lincoln Center’s Vivian Beaumont Theater after a previous production at the La Jolla Playhouse. The line is spoken by a government agent investigating the monetary tomfoolery of Robert Merkin, a fictional version of junk-bond king Michael Millken. The character is expressing the exasperated view of most of the public who are not in the financial field when the intricacies of big-time investment are discussed. Fortunately, Akhtar, who won the Pulitzer for *Disgraced*, and his director Doug Hughes makes these complex maneuverings fascinating and exciting, if not entirely understandable.



Steven Pasquale in *Junk*.

Credit: T. Charles Erickson

The story follows the not-strictly-legal shenanigans of Merkin (played with a savage gusto by Steven Pasquale) who upends Wall Street in the 1980s by hostilely taking over blue-chip corporations with high-risk, debt-rich securities known as junk bonds. The money trail takes us from Los Angeles to New York to Allegheny, Pennsylvania, home of Everson Steel, Merkin’s latest target, a third-generation family business ripe for plucking. Along the way we encounter insider trading, poison pills, white knights, racism, anti-Semitism, class conflict, political ambition, and the disturbing observation that Merkin’s predatory practices have become commonplace in both business and public life. Akhtar paints a compelling and large canvas depicting an America celebrating massive wealth and moral bankruptcy.

Hughes’ crisp staging on John Lee Beatty’s chrome-and-steel unit set keeps the action moving as fast as those neon symbols on the stock market news zipper and the large cast (over 20 which is huge for a non-musical Broadway show) create distinct and vibrant characters so we follow the sometimes confusing storyline. Particularly memorable are Michael Siberry’s patrician financier, Rick Holmes’ bewildered and blustering steel tycoon, and Joey Slotnick’s shady stock trader.

Like Akhtar, Richard Nelson has created a compelling view of an insider world. His *Illyria* focuses on the theater folk behind the fledgling New York Shakespeare Festival in the summer of 1958 as they face a myriad of financial, artistic and political setbacks and prepare for a production of *Twelfth Night* (which is set in the imaginary idyllic land of the title). *Illyria* is being presented at the Public Theater, the current home of the NYSF, now a respected cultural institution. Unlike Akhtar, Nelson has not invented thinly-veiled fictional versions of his characters, but gives their real names. In another dissimilarity, *Junk* is full of bombast while *Illyria* is played and directed (by

Nelson) in such a low-key manner it's like eavesdropping on private conversations. But that's exactly the effect the playwright-director is after. In his Apple and Gabriel family plays, also produced at the Public, we seemed to be dropping in on real-life situations where tiny, everyday details mix with momentous events.



The cast of *Illyria*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The main conflict is between the Festival's fiery-tempered, imaginative producer Joseph Papp and the cooler, more pragmatic resident director Stuart Vaughan. Papp sees the free Shakespeare venue as a service to underserved audiences and an end in itself while Vaughan views it as a temporary stepping stone to a Broadway career. Nelson skillfully mines this struggle to explore such themes as art versus commerce, the rich against the poor, theater's place in society, and the use of public space. His technique of underplayed dialogue is deceptively simple. He slips in the big ideas amid debates over which movie to see and who's dating whom.

John Magaro conveys the fury and brilliance of Papp while John Sanders captures Vaughan's measured cautious nature. They and the rest of the company create an illusion of intimacy as a legendary theater is born.



Joshua Boone and Alexandra Socha in *Actually*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

While Akhtar and Nelson have made their mark, Anna Ziegler is emerging as a vital new voice. Her play *The Last Match* is currently playing at Roundabout's Laura Pels, and her *Actually* recently opened at Manhattan Theater Club's studio space after engagements at the Geffen Playhouse and Williamstown Theater Festival. The play could not be more timely as the flood of sexual-harassment allegations raises a myriad of issues. This sharp and scary two-hander pits what some see as black-and-white into troubling realms of gray. Both sexual and racial overtones arise as African-American Tom and Jewish Caucasian Amber give separate accounts in alternating monologues of a night which may or may not have been a date rape (depending on whom you believe). Ziegler wisely does not choose sides but endows each character with virtues and flaws. Director Lileana Blain-Cruz manages to maintain tension and intensity through the play's 90-minute running time despite the limitations of the format. Joshua Boone and Alexandra Socha bring a galaxy of conflicting emotions to these confused young people. Like *Illyria*, *Actually* with its modest set and tiny cast, sneaks up on you. These Off-Broadway shows may not be as overwhelming as Broadway's *Junk*, but their punches are just as powerful. You just won't feel it right away.

Junk: Nov. 2—Jan. 7, 2018. Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center, 150 W. 65th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 7 pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$87—\$147. (212) 239-6200. www.lct.org.

Illyria: Oct. 30—Dec. 10. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Tue—Fri 7:30pm, Sat—Sun 1:30pm & 7:30pm. Running time: one hour and 40 mins. with no intermission. \$75. (212) 967-7555. www.publictheater.org.

Actually: Nov. 14—Dec. 10. Manhattan Theater Club at City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St.,

NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2:30pm & 7:30pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2:30pm & 7:30pm, Sun 2:30pm. Running time: one hour and 30 mins. with no intermission. \$30—(212) 581-1212. www.nyccitycenter.org.

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