Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Long Day's Journey into Night and The Humans Tread Common Ground

Steve Gottfried · Wednesday, June 27th, 2018

Written nearly six decades apart, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (currently playing at the Wallis Center for the Performing Arts) and *The Humans* (currently playing at the Ahmanson Theater) both grapple with family dysfunction and the human condition using a small cadre of actors hashing out their grievances and personal demons within the space of a day. I had the opportunity to see memorable performances of each within the space of two weeks, making for a very interesting bookend-like juxtaposition. *Please also see my colleague Sylvie Drake's review of* Long Day's Journey *here and* The Humans *here.*

Long Day's Journey takes place on a single day at the Connecticut summer cottage of actor/landowner James Tyrone, played by Academy Award winning actor Jeremy Irons, and showcases the trials and tribulations of the Tyrone family, fueled by the morphine addiction of matriarch Mary Tyrone and the specter of her son Edmond's fragile health. *The Humans* is set in present day New York (Chinatown to be precise), in a dilapidated but affordable and spacious duplex, as the Blake family gathers for Thanksgiving in what turns out to be an equally cathartic, if tumultuous, family gathering. There's much to find in common in these two towering examples of dysfunctional Irish-American families struggling to cope with the demons of their past and present. Both plays have won a slew of awards (though many years apart) and both productions are graced with a fine company of actors to help us navigate the terrain of the human condition.

Journey comes with an impressive bit of lore and baggage, which lends it a certain mystique right out of the gate. O'Neill never intended this semi-autobiographical play to be performed and left explicit instructions that it not be published until 25 years after his death. His widow saw to it that neither of the playwright's wishes were honored.

This production at the Wallis, directed by Sir Richard Eyre, originated in London's West End, followed by a run in Brooklyn, before its final stop at the Wallis, was cut from its standard four-hour running time to three and a half hours including intermission. This landmark piece of writing is a harrowing journey and challenging for an audience even under the best conditions. The cast assembled at the Wallis acquitted themselves admirably though it wasn't without flaws. Jeremy Irons brought the kind of regal aristocratic flair that has served him well in film. Irons manages to bring out the nuances of a man whose love for his family is fraught with disappointment coupled with regret for his own choices which derailed a more fulfilling acting career. Lesley Manville infuses Mary Tyrone with a lofty madness that ebbs and flows with her mania and denial. She is a woman caught in the throes of melancholy and despair, desperately clinging to a role as mother she

never fully embraced and a past she never quite reconciled with. Between the dueling narcissism of Mary and James, it's a wonder that their two sons, played by Matthew Beard as Edmund and Rory Keenan as James Jr., ever had a chance at finding their own identity. Keenan delivers the simmering resentment of James Jr. as his father's wayward son. Keenan brings a frenetic energy to the role which served his character's manic ups and downs. Matthew Beard seemed slightly off-kilter as the younger Edmund Tyrone, the surrogate for O'Neill himself. Perhaps it was a directorial decision to show Edmund as somewhat disconnected from his family's histrionics, but his moody introspective affect felt at times as if he was in a different play altogether.

The Humans playwright Stephen Karam finds a way to bring the themes explored in *Long Day's Journey* to a contemporary audience, which is at once recognizable, realistic and mercifully funny, and all within the space of a 90 minute running time. Sarah Steele brings an easy likeability to her performance as Brigid Blake, the somewhat anxious host of this Thanksgiving dinner, who's trying so hard to please everyone but carrying her own burdens as a struggling musician. Nick Mills brings a quirky, self-effacing likeability to Richard Saad, Brigid's endearingly pleasant boyfriend. Cassie Beck supplies a nice study in contrast as Aimee, Brigid's lawyer sister who's plagued with ulcerative colitis, which necessitates frequent trips to the bathroom. Aimee's placid façade masks her own struggles, being railroaded out of her law practice and still reeling from a painful breakup with her lesbian ex. Jayne Houdyshell and Reed Birney both won Tony Awards for their portrayal of Brigid and Aimee's parents, Deirdre and Erik Blake, who have made the trek from Scranton, Pennsylvania with their ailing mother. Deirdre and Erik are convincing as salt-of-the-earth folk who've worked ordinary jobs most of their lives and are feeling the pinch of retirement angst without much of a nest egg. They live with and care for Erik's mom Fiona (affectionately referred to as "Momo") who is confined to a wheelchair. Houdyshell and Birney are completely believable as a married couple who seem like a comfortable pair of worn shoes which are coming apart at the seams. Lauren Klein rounds out the sextet as the nearly uncommunicative "Momo," Brigid and Aimee's grandmother who's suffering from advanced dementia. It's a testament to Ms. Klein's non-verbal talents that though most of what comes out of her mouth is unintelligible, her body language and facial expressions speak volumes. She is Deirdre and Erik's beloved albatross, their cross to bear, which becomes all the more apparent when we discover the final revelation in their marriage that comes toward the play's end.

L-R: Reed Birney, Cassie Beck, Jayne Houdyshell, Lauren Klein, Sarah Steele and Nick Mills in ?*The Humans*? at the Ahmanson Theatre presented by Center Theatre Group.

Long Day's Journey into Night was groundbreaking for its time for offering an unflinching look at the psychological fissures within a family while showing the fragility and resilience of the human spirit. And in many ways, *The Humans* – with its unflinching look at another family — is groundbreaking for our own time. Both plays are a testament to the enduring power of theater to see ourselves in ways that are recognizable and illuminating.

Image: The set and cast of The Bristol Old Vic production of Eugene O'Neill's Long Day's Journey Into Night at The Wallis in Beverly Hills. l-r: Matthew Beard, Lesley Manville, Jeremy Irons & Rory Keenan. Photo by Lawrence K. Ho.

[alert type=alert-white]Please consider making a tax-deductible donation now so we can keep publishing strong creative voices.[/alert]

This entry was posted on Wednesday, June 27th, 2018 at 7:20 pm and is filed under Theatre
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can skip to the end and leave a response. Pinging is currently not allowed.