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Making and Missing Connections: Frankie and Johnny, Long Lost, Happy Talk

David Sheward · Wednesday, June 5th, 2019

Breaking the metaphorical walls between disconnected people is the common theme of three new NYC productions. On Broadway, Terrence McNally's *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune* is a tender romance between unlikely lovers, while Off-Broadway, Donald Margulies' *Long Lost* and Jesse Eisenberg's *Happy Talk* are more abrasive accounts of manipulation and dysfunction with self-loathing antagonists seeking support in twisted ways. All three provide absorbing portraits of the quest for love and comfort with the more experienced authors McNally and Margulies succeeding in creating believable and moving evenings.

Audra McDonald and Michael Shannon in *Frankie and Johnny in the Clair de Lune*
Credit: Deen van Meer

The two-hander *Frankie and Johnny* is one of the prolific McNally's better known works, premiering Off-Broadway in 1987 at Manhattan Theater Club with Kathy Bates and F. Murray Abraham as middle-aged co-workers at a diner searching for romance before it's too late. Abraham was replaced by Kenneth Walsh and the play transferred to a hit Off-Broadway commercial run. A 1991 film version starred a miscast, glamorous Al Pacino and Michelle Pfeiffer as the blue-collar pair. Stanley Tucci and Edie Falco headlined a 2002 Broadway revival. Now, Oscar nominee Michael Shannon and six-time Tony winner Audra McDonald step outside their usual roles to essay the lonely couple.

The towering Shannon is known for playing tormented sufferers (*Revolutionary Road, Nocturnal Animals*) and menacing villains (*The Shape of Water, Man of Steel*) while McDonald is mostly celebrated for her musical triumphs in shows such as *Carousel, Ragtime,* and *Shuffle Along*, and straight plays with musical elements like *Lady Day at Emerson's Bar and Grill* and *Master Class*. This time, Shannon is a nice, genuine guy and, apart from humming a brief snatch of "Almost Like Being in Love," McDonald does not sing. They are both equally brilliant in these departures from their familiar parts.

McNally's skillful script deceptively seems to only depict a one-night stand between the title loners in Frankie's cramped apartment (Riccardo Hernandez's detailed set, along with Natasha Katz's poetic lighting, suggests both the characters' strained economic status and their idealistic yearnings). But McNally transforms a simple date into a life-and-death struggle as the needy

Johnny seeks a lifetime commitment from the reluctant Frankie. In lesser hands, Johnny could have come across as a creepy stalker, but director Arin Arbus and her sensitive actors keep compassion at the forefront. Arbus perfectly balances the play's comic and dramatic elements while Shannon juggles Johnny's intensity and sweetness. Likewise, McDonald blends Frankie's vulnerability with the steely toughness she has developed to cover up wounds dealt by an abusive ex. Their bittersweet, push-pull dance of acceptance, resistance, pain, ecstasy, and meatloaf sandwiches is heartbreaking, joyous, and irresistible.

Just as *Frankie and Johnny* might have descended into melodrama, Donald Margulies' *Long Lost* at Manhattan Theater Club could easily have become a soap opera or Lifetime-TV-movie. Black-sheep, middle-aged Billy arrives unannounced at the swanky office of his successful, estranged brother David during the Christmas holidays claiming he is dying of cancer and has nowhere to go after having destroyed all of his relationships. The manipulative Billy sows disaster wherever he goes, undermining David's happy marriage to the self-possessed Molly and damaging his bond with his teenaged son Jeremy, just back from college.

Lee Tergesen and Kelly AuCoin in *Long Lost.*
Credit: Joan Marcus

This basic plot potentially reeks of cliche. But Margulies whose in-depth studies of familial ties include the Pulitzer-winning *Dinner with Friends, Sight Unseen* and *The Loman Family Picnic*, does not fall into the trap of making Billy a one-dimensional villain bent on destroying his sibling's happiness. There are layers of deception within David's seemingly idyllic lifestyle and Billy is not as devious as he appears. Margulies shades his characters in life-like gradations of grey and drops tiny hints of plot which later explode with significance. Daniel Sullivan provides a sturdy staging, keeping stereotypical histrionics to a minimum, thus affording each revelation maximum impact. John Lee Beatty's tasteful set and Toni-Leslie James' understated costumes aide here.

Lee Tergerson's sneaky yet attractive Billy, Kelly AuCoin's tightly wound David, Annie Parisse's in-control yet repressed Molly, and Alex Wolff's insecure Jeremy each display the outer shell of assurance and the quivering, uncertainty within.

Jesse Eisenberg also seeks to explore the simmering rages just beneath the surface of an apparently placid household, but he really needs to stop writing the same play. The Oscar-nominated actor-playwright has previously written and starred in three works—*Asuncion*, *The Revisionist*, and *The Spoils*—all of which deal with condescending Americans ruining the lives of good-natured non-Americans with smug presumptions of superior perceptions and intelligence. For *Happy Talk*, his first piece in which the lead is not a young, white male, he has constructed a sometimes amusing, but ultimately predictable comedy-drama. The plot revolves around self-centered Lorraine (a delightfully over-the-top Susan Sarandon in a rare stage role), a community theater diva with delusions of artistry, and her attempts to create a paper marriage for her live-in aide, Ljuba (the magnificent Marin Ireland) who cares for Lorraine's bed-ridden, offstage mother and incapacitated husband Bill (perfectly understated Daniel Oreskes).

Nico Santos, Susan Sarandon, and Marin Ireland in *Happy Talk.*
Credit: Monique Carboni

The title derives from a song from *South Pacific*, Lorraine's current vehicle for the Jewish

Community Center. She is miscast as Bloody Mary and the tune refers to her penchant to cover up any unpleasantries with a forced peppy attitude. Ljuba, an illegal immigrant from Serbia, adopts Lorraine's rose-colored outlook about eventually becoming a US citizen and reuniting with her daughter. Needless to say and true to Eisenberg's previous works, Lorraine's unrealistic viewpoint and overweaning egotism eventually destroys Ljuba's future. The playwright does supply piercingly funny moments, precisely set up and staged by Scott Elliott, as when Lorraine engineers a fake romance between her gay co-star Ronnie (a very funny Nico Santos) and Ljuba. Oreskes' eloquent silent reactions and Santos' hilariously delivered quips, chock full of musical-comedy references, merge with Sarandon's on-target portrayal of Lorraine's oblivious drive for the spotlight and Ireland's grounded depiction of the desperate but chipper Ljuba, to create comedy which both touching and riotous.

But then Eisenberg pours on the pathos with an out-of-nowhere nocturnal visit from Lorraine's nightmare of a daughter Jenny (Tedra Millan doing the best she can with a one-dimensional role). From this point on, Lorraine is unbelievably transformed into a destructive monster and the play loses its impact. *Happy Talk* has its sequences of fun and insight, but fails to sustain a truly credible situation and complex characters.

Frankie and Johnny in the Claire de Lune: May 30—Aug. 25. Broadhurst Theatre, 235 W. 44th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 15 mins. including intermission. $49—$159. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

Long Lost: June 4—30. Manhattan Theater Club at NY City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: one hour and 40 mins. with no intermission. $89. (212) 581-1212. www.nycitycenter.org.

Happy Talk: May 16—June 16. The New Group at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: one hour and 40 mins. with no intermission. $40—$125. (212) 279-4200. www.ticketcentral.com.

This review previously appeared on Theaterlife.com.

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