Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Marvin's Room Achieves Intimacy on Broadway

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 19th, 2017

Most plays get broader when they move to Broadway, but *Marvin's Room*, the 1990 comedy-drama about a family coping with death and disease, has grown more intimate in its first production on the Main Stem. The late Scott McPherson's touchingly dark piece premiered in regional productions at the Goodman and Hartford Stage and then at Playwrights Horizons in 1991 before a commercial Off-Broadway run (a financial impossibility these days.) Tragically, McPherson died of AIDS at the age of 33 not long after the play opened. That NYC production won the Drama Desk Award for Outstanding Play (a rarity for an Off-Broadway production) and I recall David Petrarca's polished staging as hitting the comic notes with a professional sharpness.

Janeane Garofalo and Lili Taylor in *Marvin's Room*.
Credit: Joan Marcus

Anne Kauffman who directs the current Roundabout Theatre Company revival now at the American Airlines Theatre, has sacrificed some of the laugh lines for a more naturalistic tone. At first, this seemed to be an error. The quiet moments appeared to be lost in the vastness of Laura Jellinek's open-ended set depicting several locations in breezy, beachy Florida. But gradually, the small scale of the performances and the direction draw us in, causing us to listen carefully and become more involved with the people onstage.

Those characters are heartbreakingly sad and hilariously eccentric. Like the protagonists of the novels of John Irving and Anne Tyler, they find themselves in tragic situations, but see the humor in them. McPherson perfectly balances both sides of the human equation in his life-like portrayal.

The casting is another factor in the show's success. Lili Taylor and Janeane Garofalo resemble each other facially and stature-wise, so they really do seem to be the estranged sisters Bessie and Lee, reunited when Bessie is diagnosed with leukemia and must reach out to her sibling as a possible bone-marrow donor. Bessie has been selflessly caring for their elderly father (the Marvin of the title) and Aunt Ruth, both of whom have a multitude of medical issues. But Lee has troubles of her own with a failed marriage, a burned-down house and two troubled sons, also potential donors for their Aunt Bessie. The collisions and conflicts within this quirky clan make up the action of the play as Bessie must transition from caregiver to patient and Lee attempts to straighten out her messy life.

Lili Taylor, Janeane Garofalo, and Jack DiFalco in *Marvin's Room*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The opening moments set the mood of unhappy circumstance leavened by comic observation. Bessie is getting blood work from a fumbling doctor (a funny Triney Sandoval) who drops hypos, swats at cockroaches and chastises the receptionist who happens to be his brother. All of this while Bessie must face the possibility of a fatal disease. Taylor subtly limns Bessie's calm grace and acceptance of the comic and tragic overlap. Garofalo doesn't push Lee's clueless narcissism so that while we may not entirely sympathize with the character, at least we can understand her. In the same vein, Celia Weston wisely downplays Ruth's batty behavior (her obsession with a TV soap opera get many appreciative chuckles). As Lee's troubled teenage son Hank, Jack DiFalco is not the raging terror he could have easily been, but a boy in pain. All the choices in this tender revival reveal an involving and human story, unmarred by overdrawn theatrics. Like the family at the end of the play, it feels as if we are in Marvin's room rather than watching actors in a theater.

June 29—Aug. 27. Roundabout Theatre Company at the American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 8pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2 pm. Running time: two hours and 15 mins. including intermission. $47—$147. (212) 719-1300. www.roundabouttheatre.org.

This review previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com.

[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, July 19th, 2017 at 4:31 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.