Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Mary-Louise Parker Resonates in Broadway Sound

David Sheward · Wednesday, October 30th, 2019

Before Adam Rapp's *The Sound Inside* begins at Studio 54, the ushers are more than usually diligent about insisting all phones be turned completely off, since the play begins in total darkness. With all potential distractions silenced and screens blanked, we are emerged in a inky void and lighting designer Heather Gilbert slowly begins to reveal a lone figure reading from a manuscript. It is the remarkable Mary-Louise Parker as Bella Baird, a writing professor, who begins recounting her life-altering encounter with a mysterious student and we are taken into another world, sometimes as mundane as this one and sometimes as profoundly disturbing as a nightmare.

Mary-Louise Parker and Will Hochman in *The Sound Inside*.
Credit: Jeremy Daniel

Bella was a once promising novelist whose debut work was met with muted praise and she retreated into the safety of academia. She tells of no personal relationships, has not published another piece of fiction since her first effort, and apparently has no life outside her classes. All of that changes when she receives a shattering medical diagnosis and a peculiar but brilliant student knocks on her office door. Christopher, Bella's eccentric pupil (the equally enrapturing Will Hochman), rails against email and computers, demanding a human connection with his teacher and her honest evaluation of his work—a novella of stolen identity and creative yearning. (By the way, the stories-within-the-story by Bella and Christopher are just as riveting as the main plot.) These two outsiders seek validation from each other and the resultant tragedy is eerie and devastating.

Rapp's work is hypnotic and intense, a love letter to the written word in an age of cyber and digital communication. Rather than portraying the events in direct stage action, much of the play is relayed in long monologues told as flashbacks. This is a risky technique and could come across as removing us from the characters and the plot. Why not just write it as a novel or a short story? But, as he has done in previous brilliant works such as *Nocturne* and *The Edge of Our Bodies*, Rapp wraps us up in the story if we're willing to give ourselves over to it.

WIll Hochman and Mary-Louise Parker in *The Sound Inside*.
Credit: Jeremy Daniel

David Cromer's ethereal yet full-blooded staging proceeds like a filmic dream where the pieces of Alexander Woodward's spectral set fade in and out of the vast Studio 54 stage with the aide of Gilbert's haunting lighting. An office suddenly appears out of nowhere, then it turns into a small

restaurant and then Bella's sad, dark apartment. The action flows seamlessly from Bella's perspective to Christopher's, from the present to the past, from subjective to objective. Parker, one of the few major actresses known in filmed media who regularly takes on stage work, soulfully conveys Bella's love of literature and her fear of failure. On her eloquent features you can see the spark of joy as she discovers a new talent and the shiver of mortality as she encounters the edge of death. Hochman is spiritedly intense and youthfully passionate as the enigmatic Christopher.

With insightful and subtle acting, direction and design *Sound* takes us inside a writer's mind and her aching heart, a rare feat on Broadway where musicals and comedy reign.

Oct. 17—Jan. 12, 2020. Studio 54, 254 W. 54th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission. $49—$169. (212) 239-6200.

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