Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Mid-Life Crisis Here We Go. Again.

Sylvie · Wednesday, January 23rd, 2019

I'm not sure how many more midlife crises will be at the center of an American play (too many by my count) but, if *Linda Vista,* the comedy (?) at The Mark Taper Forum by actor/playwright Tracy Letts is any indication, we may finally be running out of variations on this subject. It's too facile, overused and over abused.

Letts has written a number of other plays, the sour *August: Osage County* being the best known and most awarded. In this most recent *Linda Vista,* the laugh lines tackle the tedious travails of Wheeler (Ian Barford), a middle-aged man with a bad hip, a pending divorce, and a search for a new self, plus any future he can scare up in the overcrowded field of lonely dystopian women.

l-r, Ian Barford & Tim Hopper in *Linda Vista* at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum.

It sounds familiar because it is. I'd love to give Letts more credit, but this part-time comedy is stuffed with every dead-end conversation you've ever had that you wish you hadn't, and it's all in the service of too few funny lines and a dreary couple of buff-naked sex scenes. Fake bad sex is not a recommended spectator sport.

As you might suspect, Wheeler is a rootless self-centered guy who doesn't lack for occasional wit, but like Molière's misanthrope, he can be cloyingly long-winded and totally enervating. So can Michael (Troy West), the man who owns the San Diego camera shop where Wheeler, who left Chicago and an aborted career as a *Sun Times* photographer, now has a desultory job repairing cameras.

l-r, Ian Barford & Troy West in *Linda Vista* at Center Theatre Group's
Mark Taper Forum.

Linda Vista, which means beautiful view, is the name of the complex where Wheeler has rented a generic apartment (the scenic design is by Todd Rosenthal and lighting by Marcus Doshi). The name is a PR stretch, since the "view" can only be glimpsed on your tippy-toes between obliterating high-rises. Wheeler is helped in this move-in by his friend Paul (Tim Hopper), an ostensibly happy man, married to Margaret (Sally Murphy). But don't take it from me. As Wheeler tells us, "life is mostly disappointing;" it's the truth you *don't* reveal that matters.

Ian Barford & Sally Murphy in *Linda Vista* at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum.

Together, Paul and Margaret arrange to introduce Wheeler to their friend Jules (Cora Vander Broek), a classy life coach with an unusual name and a degree in happiness — an elusive condition that Jules, a woman now in her late 30s, is still pursuing.

Cora Vander Broek & Ian Barford in *Linda Vista* at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum.

Jules and Wheeler's second encounter doesn't go too well, until it does. All might have ended happily, were it not for a late-night intrusion from Minnie (Chantal Thuy), a chance acquaintance who's also a pregnant and desperate neighbor whose abusive boyfriend has locked her out of his apartment before taking a powder. When Wheeler invites Minnie to sleep off that awful night in his apartment and she stays for a month, changes follow.

No more spoilers, but this is where the comedy turns weird and bleak. Letts paints himself into a corner. A change in tone and substance delivers a second half that is just as overlong and chatty as the first, but a lot less funny. *Linda Vista* becomes a series of floating scenes, some quite rich in isolated bursts, but without enough cohesion, and in search of an ending that proves elusive. The play doesn't end, it simply stops.

Ian Barford & Chantal Thuy in *Linda Vista* at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum.

That is not the best playwriting. At almost three hours of unenlightening banter, Letts desperately needed a better friend or editor or dramaturg or director willing to suggest where and how much to cut — apparently unlike Dexter Bullard, who is the director he got. Letts also may wish to decide if this is a comedy or a drama or that androgynous in-between thing called a dramedy. Ironically, the last third of the play has some of its meatiest writing, but by then it's too late. By then we're worn out and just want to go home.

Aside from this failure to rein in both the effluvium of words and the lightweight cleverness, Bullard's direction does extract some fine performances, especially Barford's, whose Wheeler is a Gordian Knot of conflicting emotions, few of them particularly inspired, but certainly delivered with intelligence and an almost-charm behind the self-deprecation. It does not save the play.

Vander Broek's Jules has the hardest climb, going from appealing and a tad too eager to please, to rejected, hurt and confused, yet regaining her footing enough to find the strength to resist Wheeler's miserable attempt at a comeback.

Chantal Thuy's Minnie is a more permanently damaged creature and her performance is too neutral for the person she has warned Wheeler she is: prepared to hurt him. The role makes demands that are tough to overcome; Thuy does so, intermittently.

The actor in Letts, however, knows his own kind and makes sure that all the players have their moment in the storm, including Murphy's raw Margaret, who's not afraid to tell Wheeler exactly what she thinks of him — and Caroline Neff's deft performance as Anita, the self-effacing only other employee at the camera shop, wise enough to keep her own counsel, yet generous enough to see Wheeler through his most painful crisis.

Ian Barford & Caroline Neff in *Linda Vista* at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum.

In the end the only thing that's abundantly clear is that *Linda Vista* is a mess. Perhaps Letts should listen to Wheeler when he says, "you know your movie's too long when you have to give people an intermission." Maybe he should forget *Linda Vista* for a year or two then, if inclined, take it out and cut it by half. At 90 minutes, with no intermission (and please no fake sex), who knows…? Anything can happen.

Top image: Ian Barford as Wheeler, moving into his San Diego apartment in Linda Vista *at Center Theatre Group's Mark Taper Forum.*

Photos by Craig Schwartz Photography

WHAT: *Linda Vista*

WHERE: Mark Taper Forum, Music Center, 135 N. Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Saturdays, 8 pm; Saturdays 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays 1 & 6:30pm.

HOW: Tickets, $30–$99 (subject to change), available at 213.628.2772 or online at CenterTheatreGroup.org, or in person at the Ahmanson Theatre Box Office. Groups: 213.972.7231. Deaf community: Info & charge, visit CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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