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# Notes, Women, Charity: Post-Election Blues

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 23rd, 2016

The recent presidential election has shifted the subtext of two Off-Broadway plays. With the unexpected triumph of Donald Trump as president, irony has been added and at the performances attended, the audience sighed with regret at lines which would have had a different meaning if the outcome had favored Hillary Clinton. Both still offer telling and sharp snapshots of America at this moment as we are balanced on a knife-edge precipice between a conflicted recent past and an uncertain future.

Anna Deavere Smith in *Notes from the Field*
Credit: Joan Marcus

The most ironic post-election moment in *Notes from the Field*, Anna Deavere Smith's latest hybrid foray into journalism and theater, comes late in the evening. As Sherrilyn Ifill, president and director-counsel of the NAACP Legal and Education Fund, Smith states in the next three years, the country will be making a major investment and hopefully it will be in education. After speaking those lines, the actress-playwright turned her face from the audience and paused for a few moments to dead silence. One can only imagine that with Trump headed to the White House, Smith may have been struck by the missed opportunity for a renaissance in public education, given the Donald's statements on drastically cutting federal government funding in this area.

It's a heartbreaking image in a play of heartbreak. As with her earlier works, this is a collection of monologues derived from the author's interviews with hundreds of subjects affected by the same topic with Smith playing all the characters. She's examined the Crown Heights riots (*Fires in the Mirror*), the Rodney King controversy (*Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*), the relationship between the White House and the press (*House Arrest*), and the American health care system (*Let Me Down Easy*). In *Notes*, she plays educators, politicians, students, and activists caught in the school-to-prison pipeline. She begins with the staggering number of high-profile incidents of fatal encounters between unarmed African-American men and the police and then moves to individual stories of the struggling public school system, revealing how the two are connected.

Among the most striking portraits are a Latino mother going to extreme lengths to keep her kids out of trouble, a woman imprisoned as an accomplice to murder regretting her choices but deriving joy from training dogs, and a teacher detailing the arduous work of keeping order in her classroom ("It's like running a jail without a gun"). Each of the 17 characters comes to intense life as Smith assembles a vibrant collage of voices. Leonard Foglia provides smooth direction and transitions between the pieces while cellist Marcus Shelby elegantly accompanies and humorously interacts with Smith.

Maryann Plunkett, Roberta Maxwell, Amy Warren, and Jay O. Sanders
in *Women of a Certain Age*
Credit: Joan Marcus

The election has an even greater impact on Richard Nelson's *Women of a Certain Age*, the third and final play in his trilogy about an American family in this tumultuous year. We are once again in the Gabriel kitchen in the upstate New York town of Rhinebeck. It's election day, Nov. 8, in the early evening, a few hours before the returns come in. As the Gabriels prepare a meal, they revive old hurts, face new challenges, and seek comfort as the nation is about to change. As in the earlier works in this cycle, *Hungry* and *What Did You Expect?*, politics creeps slowly into the conversation, but it underscores everything that is said in hushed tones.

The play takes place before the ballots are finally counted and much of the political dialogue focuses on Clinton and what her victory would be like. But the prospect of a moderate woman president instead of a fire-breathing demagogue does not brighten the Gabriels' discourse or outlook. (The eventual outcome makes the discussion all the more shattering.) The family house must be sold, all of its members are still grieving the recent death of elder brother Thomas, a playwright, and are facing limited employment prospects. None have faith in government no matter who runs it. Once again, Nelson's quiet subtle direction and his Chekhovian script evoke a realistic, slightly humorous, and movingly melancholy milieu. The cast continues to excel. Maryann Plunkett's gracious Mary, Jay O. Sanders' befuddled, teddy-bearish George, Lynn Hawley's feisty Hannah, Amy Warren's wounded, passive-aggressive Joyce, and Meg Gibson's desperately needy Karin pull at our heartstrings without tugging too hard. Most devastating of all is Roberta Maxwell's defeated matriarch Patricia. The fiery spirit she exhibited in the earlier plays is quenched by circumstance and bad choices. Maxwell shows us the ember of Patricia's barely-flickering personality as she attempts to make sense of a confusing new world.

Sutton Foster and Shuler Hensley in *Sweet Charity*
Credit: Monique Carboni

The current political climate even has resonance in a revival of a seemingly frivolous musical from the late Golden Age of Broadway. *Sweet Charity* was conceived as a star vehicle for Gwen Verdon by her then-husband Bob Fosse in 1966. Shirley MacLaine headlined the 1969 movie version and subsequent Broadway productions starred Debbie Allen and Christina Applegate, respectively. Cy Coleman's peppy score and Dorothy Fields' witty lyrics still snap, crackle and pop despite the occasional dated reference. Neil Simon's book transforms the heroine of Federico Fellini's *Nights of Cabiria* from a soft-hearted Roman prostitute to a soft-hearted Manhattan dance-hall hostess. The position of women allowing customers to paw them as they tango together has vanished from our culture, but the exploitation of female sexuality continues—even allegedly by the president-elect and the ousted head of Fox News. Director Leigh Silverman puts a dark, feminist spin on the musical in her intimate revival for The New Group at the Signature Center.

The band is all female, offering an ironic slant on female objectification, and costume designer Clint Ramos has dressed Charity and her fellow not-quite sex workers in matching spangled halters and big wigs so they look alike, a chorus of overpainted dolls catering to male fantasies.

Shining through the gloom is the luminous Sutton Foster as the heartbreaking Charity. Her sad-clown antics bring to mind the tender-toughness of Giuletta Masina (of the original Fellini work), the comedy genius of Lucille Ball, and the musical-theater pizzazz of Verdon and MacLaine. This is a performer who will do anything to illuminate her role from literally crawling all over a repulsive boyfriend to being splashed in the face with water (twice) to baring Charity's confused

and torn soul in the climactic “Where Am I Going?”

Shuler Hensley is brilliantly neurotic as her pathetic suitor Oscar and Joel Perez impressively quadruples as the abusive boyfriend, an Italian movie star, the scuzzy manager of the dance hall, and a flaky cult leader. Asmeret Ghebremichael and Emily Padgett are delightfully gritty as two of Charity’s co-workers.

At the end of the show, Charity is standing alone in Central Park with no love, no money, and no job, but she looks at the dawn and smiles with hope. The Gabriels have less optimism, but here’s to looking ahead like Charity with belief in ourselves and our national destiny.

*Notes from the Field*: Nov. 2—Dec. 18. Second Stage Theatre, 305 W. 43rd St., NYC. Tue—Thu, 7 pm;  Fri—Sat, 8 pm; Sat, 2 pm; Sun, 3 pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. $92—$107. (212) 246-4422. www.2st.com.

*Women of a Certain Age*: Nov. 8—Dec. 4. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Tue—Sun, 7:30 pm; Sat, Sun, 2 pm. Running time: 100 mins. with no intermission. $65. (212) 967-7555. www.publictheater.org.

*Sweet Charity*: Nov. 20—Jan. 8. The New Group at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue—Fri, Sun, 7:30 pm; Sat, 8 pm; Wed, Sat, Sun, 2 pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. (212) 244-7529. TheNewGroup.org.

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