Cultural Daily

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Odets' Awake & Sing Moves Us. Again.

Sylvie · Wednesday, October 14th, 2015

Watching the really fine revival of a modern classic is a little like biting into a familiar sandwich that suddenly tastes infinitely better, just because its commonplace ingredients are so fresh, so special, so balanced and well seasoned that they come alive. Seemingly as never before.

This is a bit of a far-fetched analogy, but it is exactly how it feels to sit through Clifford Odets' *Awake & Sing* at The Odyssey Theatre — a play as familiar and traditional as they come, and one so frequently revived that you'd think there would be no audiences left for it. And yet, in the right hands, as it happens to be here, it is still capable of coming off as an absolute gem of a period piece. And much more.

The period is 1934, when the country was enduring the fallout of The Great Depression, and the people we meet are the modest middle class Jews of the Bronx who are having a hard time coping and huddle together in extended families in order to make ends meet.

James Morosini, left, and Allan Miller in *Awake & Sing.* Photo by Ron Sossi.

We're in the claustrophobic apartment of Myron and Bessie Berger (Robert Lesser and Marilyn Fox), also shared by their son Ralph (James Morosini) and grandfather Jacob (Allan Miller), a retired barber whose greatest joy is listening to his collection of Enrico Caruso records.

Sharing many meals and much time together are daughter Hennie (Melisa Paladino), who has married the nebbishy Sam Feinschriber (Gary Patent), only because she needed a father for a child conceived out of wedlock. Dropping in and out and spending time at the groaning table are the blowhard Uncle Morty (Richard Fancy), who seems relatively unscathed financially by recent events, and an old friend of the family, Moe Axelrod (David Agranov), a smart, hard-bitten bookie who lost a leg in the war and hangs around mostly because he hankers after Hennie.

Melissa Paladino and David Agranov in *Awake & Sing*. Photo by Ron Sossi.

Bessie's husband Myron is ineffectual and Bessie has become the uncontested matriarch of this clan. Whatever Bessie does or says goes. Keeping up appearances means everything to Bessie, and as a result she singlehandedly causes unintended chaos in her family's varied lives. She interferes with son Ralph's serious romance with a woman "who has no parents," something in Bessie's world akin to being the child of a prostitute and the devil; and when the biological father of

Hennie's baby does his vanishing act, Bessie pushes her daughter into a loveless marriage with Sam in the name of respectability (and deep unhappiness).

It is more than a little ironic that, when this habit of meddling veers off the charts one day, it lands on an innocent bystander — grandfather Jacob, the philosopher of the clan and an example of dignified sobriety, who becomes the most tragic victim of Bessie's uncontrolled wrath.

So the production has its heart-stopping moments, but a bigger reason why this spry 80-year-old play remains so vibrant and engrossing is that it loudly echoes so many aspects of our own times — the scarcity of good jobs, income inequality, wage stagnation, an uncertain future and a broken economy. And so it springs to life untrammeled in the 21st century, like a freshly opened time capsule that has suffered absolutely no damage.

In addition, this *Awake & Sing* is expertly staged by Elina de Santos (now an artistic co-director of Rogue Machine Theatre) who, two decades ago, in 1994, had directed a marathon, award-winning nine-month run of *Awake & Sing* at the Odyssey, with Fox even then playing Bessie. De Santos therefore had the pervious intimacy with the material that ensured that all roles would be perfectly cast. The performances this time around are flawless, true to the period in every respect, as is the set by Pete Hickok, the costumes by Kim DeShazo and especially props by Katherine S. Hunt. Lighting and sound design, by Leigh Allen and Christopher Moscatiello, respectively, are clear and do the job.

Awake & Sing is performed in the smallest of the Odyssey's three theatres, which augments the deliberate claustrophobia of the play. But it is the people and the perilous paths they travel in these limited confines that capture our undivided attention.

James Morosini and Marilyn Fox in *Awake & Sing*. Photo by Ron Sossi.

The only unconvincing moment comes when Ralph, to whom Grandpa has exclusively left a small life insurance policy, decides to cave in to his mother's insistence that the family share in this wealth. As always, Bessie is pretty persuasive, but this is one time when she deserved to fail.

Top image: l-r, Robert Lesser, David Agranov, Allan Miller, Richard Fancy, James Morosini Photo by Ron Sossi.

WHAT: Awake & Sing

WHERE: The Odyssey Theatre Ensemble, 2055 So. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90025.

WHEN: ?Fridays & Saturdays, 8 pm; Sundays 2 p.m.? Also Wednesday, Nov. 4, and Thursdays Oct. 22, 29, Nov. 12, 19 — all at 8 p.m. ?Ends Dec. 13.

HOW: Tickets: Wed-Thurs, $25; Fri, $30; Sat-Sun, $34; seniors: $20. Students/Equity/SAG-AFTRA, $15. All tickets are available at www.odysseytheatre.com or at 310.477.2055 x 2, or in person at the box office.

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