Cultural Daily

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Oh, How Bigly the Ugly Have Risen

Sylvie · Wednesday, November 16th, 2016

Until November 8, Jon Robin Baitz's *Vicuña* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre was a clever and acutely topical satire that took its cues from pretty amusing current events. Or so we thought. Since November 8, that satire has curdled into tragedy, depending on which side of the nation's Great Divide you stand. More remarkable even than the room the playwright had made for the *possibility* of such a real-life outcome, the results of our recent presidential election will impact how you respond to the play — whether you laugh, fan your face or cry.

Because now *Vicuña* is a comedy with a secondary bite — much more stinging than it was before. It's a be-careful-what-you-*didn't*-wish-for kind of comedy, since its ending will most likely have you choking on your laughter. It is a blistering farce wrapped in a cautionary tale about the improbable rise of an improbable presidential candidate. That he's a dangerous man incapable of maturity, whose toys have to be taken away from him so he won't harm himself, is probably more than you need to be told. He also has an unquenchable ego, money that only dogs can hear (to quote another play), and a smart daughter Srilanka (Samantha Sloyan), named for the place where she presumably was conceived, who would like to shield her father from himself, until she can't.

The events that unfurl beyond this point will not be described here because the outcome of November 8 has affected every fiber of the play. It cannot be entirely the same satire that I saw before the election. What I can tell you is that director Robert Egan has turned in a finely tuned production that plays out in the Manhattan atelier of Anselm Kassar (Brian George), also known as *Anselme de Paris*, an immigrant bespoke tailor to the ultra rich. (The handsomely appointed set is by the ubiquitous Kevin Depinet, with costumes humorously designed by Laura Bauer, lighting by Tom Ontiveras and music and sound by Karl Fredrik Lundeberg).

Samanthat Sloyan and Ramiz Monsef in *Vicuña* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

It falls to the savvy Harry Groener to play the vulgar real estate magnate, Kurt Seaman, with uncanny persuasion and a galling panache. Kurt's views on everything are, of course, ignorant, extreme and unwisely — if skillfully — challenged by Anselm's assistant, the all-too-smart Muslim Harvard dropout Amir (Ramiz Monsef, remembered for his other striking performance in last year's *Guards at the Taj* at the Geffen). These two gladiators end up locked in a clash of political postures — a manipulation that, pre-election, would have kept you tittering on the edge of your seat. Post-election? Well…it can't help but still fascinate, primarily because of the elegant diatribes, performances and the final promise/threat made by the protean mogul.

The production gets the right added support from the balance of its small cast, which includes a lot of standing around quietly on the sidelines. It also benefits from a thanklessly hilarious, but well-handled performance by Linda Gehringer as the hapless Kitty Finch-Gibbon, delegated by her

more craven legislative colleagues to try to dissuade the Big Man from running. Good luck with that.

Harry Groener and Linda Gehringer in *Vicuña* at the Kitk Douglas Theatre.

That Baitz wrote *Vicuña* at all had to be the explosive culmination of his exasperation with an endlessly disturbing election — or a deliberate enough-is-enough act of calculated defiance. I have no idea which — and it hardly matters.

What makes the play so remarkable as well as a little macabre is not just that the verbal sparring is so well argued by all parties, but also that, in light of the real election results, its fungible ending now also can be seen as ominously prophetic. What were once mere political implications have solidified into unimaginable realities.

There is a comment section at the end of this short essay. If you have seen this production, feel free to use it and kick off a larger conversation. Who knows? Depending on what that universal reality show called Life has in store, this little piece may demand to be continued…

Top image: l-r, Samantha Sloyan, Harry Groener, Ramiz Monsef and Brian George in Vicuña *at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.*

Photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: *Vicuña*

WHERE: Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd., Culver City, CA 90232.

WHEN: Tuesday-Friday, 8pm; Saturday 2 & 8pm; Sunday 1 & 6:30pm. Ends Nov 20.

HOW: Tickets: $25-$70 subject to change), available by phone at 213.628.2772 or online at www.CenterTheatreGroup.org.

AND ON A PERSONAL NOTE…

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CW's goal, as you know by now, is to "elevate the conversation." You don't have to be told how desperately that conversation needs elevating. If the presidential election taught us nothing else, it taught us that our minds need a lot better nourishment.

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