Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On the Other Hand, I'm Happy Too

Sylvie · Friday, March 11th, 2022

A few weeks ago, I wrote about the absurdly high price of tickets mostly to theatre as spectacle, pointing out that spectacle (which has its place) is a business venture, while the conceptual nature of theatre demands a truer respect for the kind of live performance that puts us in touch with our humanity, good and bad.

Examples of spectacle abound in the commercial theatre; examples of theatre that can make us think and feel are more rare and often found in more intimate surroundings. The play currently on stage at the Matrix Theatre on Melrose Avenue, is giving us a taste of what I'm talking about.

It has been newly occupied by Los Angeles' Rogue Machine Theatre company, and these newcomers have changed the interior space's former configuration from a wide shallow stage fronted by several rows of seats, to a wide oval and central playing area with seating on both long sides of the oval. It works remarkably well.

The play they're presenting, which goes by the applicable yet improbable title of *On the Other Hand, We're Happy,* demands this central staging. It is the work of a prolific Welsh playwright that I confess I had not heard of, and whose work I'm delighted to encounter. His name is Daf James and his talent is on full display at the Rogue.



Rori Flynn and Christian Telesmar as the happy adopting couple in On the Other Hand, We're Happy at Rogue Machine

To be clear, this production is a combination of an uncommonly well-written play, elegantly timed and staged by the esteemed Cameron Watson, with a strong three-way acting team, wherein each actor plays more than one role. A surrounding wall of rumpled fabric that mimics stone and a few large wooden cubes strategically placed by designer Stephanie Kerley Schwartz on the empty stage are all the set to speak of. Scene shifts and other effects are all in Jared Sayeg's nimble lighting.

Also, of course, with the actors and the words. PR materials aptly call this a play about "love, hope and redemption," which leaves out more than a few details. Abbie (Rori Flynn) and Josh (Christian Telesmar) are in love. Josh has bought a house thanks to a small inheritance and the two are talking marriage maybe. Even babies, maybe — babies they create together or, since the world is full of previously-created babies with no place to go, maybe one they can adopt. They're exploring their options. It's all love, hope and anxious anticipation. But unforeseen events get in the way, as they so often do. And what was mostly wine and roses now requires a major redirection.

Life can be long and everyone has had to cope with something in some fashion at some time or other. So in the end, this is a play about coping. The magic of the script is how skillfully this playwright shows us how it's done. When the birth-mother of the child about to be adopted, asks to meet the parents, is where everything changes.

I won't steal your pleasure of discovery by telling you much more, because discovery is one of the reasons for which you go to the theatre. But everything from this point on depends on revelations and difficult decisions. Alexandra Hellquist's performance as the birth-mother, Kelly, is a stunning achievement of voiced pain, intelligence, honesty, ferocity and dismay. Her abilities are highlighted once more when she's tasked with playing her own daughter, Tyler, at different ages of her life.

This sounds perilously close to melodrama, doesn't it? Right. But we are spared melodrama by the straightforward power of the acting and directing, and the superb economy of the lucid writing.

Oh, I almost forgot to mention. Playwright Daf James does not believe in slowing down the action with scene breaks. The action rolls fluidly from one scene to the next, one event into another, one emotion into the next candid revelation. There are no interruptions. And no intermission. And I forgot to mention: there are no villains on this stage either, which is a feat in itself. There are only people scrambling to get on with it, any way they can figure out. As it turns out, they manage very well in a shockingly life-affirming way.

Those last two are the truest words with which to describe this play. Life affirming. It leaves you spent, wondrous and grateful, because some part of the action may well have touched some deep part of yourself as well. It is, as I was saying, what the theatre does best. And this playwright and this company know it in their bones.



Alexandra Hellquist Christian Telesmar as daughter and Dad in On the Other Hand, We're Happy at Rogue Machine

What: *On the Other Hand, We're Happy*

When: 8pm Fridays, Saturdays, Mondays; 3pm Sundays; through April 10.

Where: Rogue Machine (at the Matrix), 7657 Melrose Ave, LA 90046.

How: For reservations call **855-585-5185 or go to Rogue Machine**

Tickets, $45, Seniors $35, Students $25. Pay-What-You-Can performances on some Fridays, starting at $10.

Parking: Street. Allow some time. Or get a ride.

IMPORTANT NOTICE: All attendees **must** present proof of FULL VACCINATION against COVID-19 (including boosters for eligible patrons) & a government-issued photo ID. Face masks to be worn indoors at all times. HVAC has been upgraded to exceed compliance with current COVID protocols. Rogue Machine also has installed HEPA air purifiers in all public spaces. Staff & artists are fully vaccinated & boosted.

This entry was posted on Friday, March 11th, 2022 at 6:48 am and is filed under Theatre, Reviews
You can follow any responses to this entry through the Comments (RSS) feed. You can leave a response, or trackback from your own site.