

Cultural Daily

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Overstuffed: Pill, Halfway Bitches, Bright Room

David Sheward · Wednesday, December 11th, 2019

Jagged Little Pill is a jagged little musical, sometimes smooth, sometimes sharp, sometimes bland and predictable, sometimes edgy and shattering. This raw, uneven tale of modern angst in an upper-class Connecticut family employs Alanis Morissette's groundbreaking 1995 album for its score. Tom Kitt did the skillful arrangements and orchestrations, combining Broadway smoothness with Morissette's signature prickly texture. Her rage-filled tone informs the polished and funny book by Oscar winner Diablo Cody (*Juno*) who has crammed in so many current social issues it feels like a rock version of an Afterschool Special. We skip from opioid addiction to rape culture to martial miscommunication to bisexuality to racial identity with barely a pause for a breath, let alone a few minutes for reflection or analysis. Even climate change gets a brief mention. Fortunately, Cody infuses wit and pathos into her fast-forward preachiness and director Diane Paulus creates a inventive, surprising staging so that you don't feel numbed by the constant crises.



Celia Rose Gooding and Lauren Patton in *Jagged Little Pill*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

The show opens with a chorus of refreshingly diverse dancers throwing themselves into Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui's frenetic, all-body choreography. Then we meet the white-bread Healys who have a lot going on. Super mom Mary Jane (a steely and shattering Elizabeth Stanley) is addicted to painkillers and bent on presenting a perfect facade. Dad Steve (handsome Sean Allan Krill skillfully hiding pain) is constantly at the office, sneaking peaks at internet porn and avoiding the cracks in family life. Daughter Frankie (full-voiced and mature Celia Rose Gooding), who is African-American and adopted, feels pressured to conceal her emerging racial awareness and bisexuality. Straight-arrow son Nick (expressive Derek Klena) has been accepted to Harvard, but feels empty inside.



Derek Klena, Celia Rose Gooding, Elizabeth Stanley, and Sean Allan Krill in *Jagged Little Pill*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

The lead characters' barrage of woes gets a bit tiring. The stories of Jo, Frankie's secret girlfriend, and Bella, Nick's classmate who is sexually assaulted at a party, emerge as more compelling. Lauren Patten's Jo is funny, scathing, razor-sharp, and aching human. She literally stops the show cold with her gut-wrenching rendition of "You Oughta Know," Morissette's break-up cry of pain. Kathryn Gallagher is equally memorable as the tormented Bella. To paraphrase one of Morissette's hits, it's ironic that the supporting figures are the real stars here. As noted, Paulus gives us

numerous dazzling sequences, particularly a heartbreaking backwards-in-time journey through Mary Jane's day as she adds scoring illegal drugs to her shopping chores. *Pill* indeed has its jagged edges, but it's ultimately a satisfying capsule.



Elizabeth Canavan, Patrice Johnson Chevannes, Kara Young, and Benja Kay Thompson in *Halfway Bitches Go Straight to Heaven*.

Credit: Monique Carboni

The Healys of *Jagged Little Pill* are confronting a plethora of problems, but they're having a day at the beach compared to the crowd at *Halfway Bitches Go Straight to Heaven* Off-Broadway at the Atlantic Theater Company. Stephen Adly Guirgis' new super-sized comedy-drama contains a stageful of characters—the huge cast numbers 18, a rarity for a straight play on or Off-Broadway—each exploding with their own trauma. We are in a women's halfway housing shelter (Narelle Sissons designed the appropriately crumbling set), and as with the Healys, a lot is going on. Sarge, a lesbian army vet, is furious that transgender prostitute Venus is taking a bed which should go to a “real woman.” Sarge's girlfriend, Bella, a stripper from Baltimore, wants a normal life but Sarge's alcoholism and anger issues keep getting in the way. Former dancer Wanda, now confined to a wheelchair, refuses to take her medication. Rockaway Rosie still mourns the rejection of her fiancé who stole her life savings hidden in a bucket of detergent. Betty refuses to take a bath. Teenagers Melba and Mateo just want to get through high school. Father Miguel and Miss Rivera attempt to run the place, but their own nerves are starting to fray as pressure mounts to close the place. And that's just a sampling of the multiple goings-on.



The company of *Halfway Bitches Go Straight to Heaven*.

Credit: Monique Carboni

As he has done with his numerous previous works including *Our Lady of 121st Street*, *The Motherf---er with the Hat*, and the Pulitzer Prize-winning *Between Riverside and Crazy*, Adly Guirgis solidly delivers a brutally honest depiction of vital, struggling people on the edge who speak in hilarious, profanity-laced slang. The script is a riot, but there are so many plot threads and characters that despite John Ortiz's controlled, muscular direction and stellar performances from the entire company (particularly Elizabeth Canavan's addled, endearing Rosie, Patrice Johnson Chevannes' regal Wanda, Liza Colon-Zayas' hair-trigger, yet vulnerable Sarge, and Elizabeth Rodriguez's fierce Miss Rivera), it's nearly impossible to keep them all straight. In addition, the author doesn't fully develop some of characters or resolve their stories. Towards the end of two hours and 45 minutes of nudity, drug abuse, assaults, stabbings, backroom sex, and a visit from a live goat, one of the characters emerges with a baby which she hasn't even mentioned heretofore.

Despite its excesses *Halfway Bitches* is an entertaining, frightening ride and its nearly three hour running time is never dull. The same cannot be said for the Public Theater's revival of Tony Kushner's *A Bright Room Called Day*. This 1985 work was Kushner's first and definitely shows the sparks of genius later responsible for *Angels in America*, but it's also overlong, talky and still doesn't entirely work in theatrical terms in spite of revisions by Kushner for this production. (*Day* was workshopped Off-Off-Broadway in 1985. Its professional premiere was in 1987 at San Francisco's Eureka Theatre. The Public presented the first Off-Broadway production in 1990.)



Jonathan Hadary, Nikki M. James, Michael Esper, and Crystal Lucas-Perry in *A Bright Room Called*

Day.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Set in Germany during the early 1930s, *Day* follows a group of progressive intellectuals as they ineffectually cope with the rise of Hitler. Sometime actress Agnes (brilliantly conflicted Nikki M. James) seeks to avoid confrontation and action, hoping the Nazi regime will blow over. Her Hungarian lover Husz (fiery Michael Esper) and Communist activist Annabella (solid Linda Emond) advocate revolution. Fellow actress Paulinka (sleek Grace Gummer) and gay chum Gregor (vital Michel Urie) escape the pending disaster by smoking opium and pursuing anonymous sex, respectively. In addition, Agnes' surprisingly well-appointed flat (the room of the title, beautifully realized by designer David Rockwell) is visited by a mysterious old woman representing hunger and complacency (Estelle Parsons, still powerful at 92) and the devil himself in the person of a vulgar middle-class merchant (commandingly crude Mark Margolis).

The basic structure is compelling enough with Der Fuehrer's power grab detailed by menacing supertitles and images (Lucy MacKinnon's projection design and Bray Poor's sound design create a harrowing atmosphere). But in the original production, Kushner added a figure from 1985 named Zillah to draw parallels between the action of the play and Ronald Reagan's shift of America toward the right. This awkward imposition drew the most criticism and now Kushner has added a second interrupter called Xillah, a stand-in for the author himself, making further commentary and obvious connections between Hitler, Reagan and the current occupant of the White House. Though Crystal Lucas-Perry's Zillah and Jonathan Hadary's Xillah are movingly played and the dialogue Kushner gives them is sometimes fascinatingly astute political observation, these characters slow down the action and drain the proceedings of drama. When they come on, the emphasis changes from frightening life-or-death decisions to dry seminar. Oskar Eustis, who directed the 1987 Eureka Theater production, gives this difficult, uneven work the best possible production, intensely human and paced with variety and wit. But, unlike the similarly overstuffed *Jagged Little Pill* and *Halfway Bitches*, *Day* is ultimately unsatisfying.

Jagged Little Pill: Opened Dec. 5 for an open run. Broadhurst Theater, 235 W. 44th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$59—\$399. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

Halfway Bitches Go Straight to Heaven: Dec. 9—29. Atlantic Theater Company and LAByrnth Theater Company at the Linda Gross Theater, 336 W. 20th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm & 7:30pm. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission. \$81.50—\$101.50. (866) 811-4111. www.ovationtix.com.

A Bright Room Called Day: Nov. 25—Dec. 22. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Tue—Fri 7pm, Sat—Sun 1pm & 7pm. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission. \$50—\$75. (212) 967-7555. www.publictheater.org.

Note: check websites for schedule changes during Christmas and New Year's week.

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