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Page to Stage: Lucy Barton, Woman in Black

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 29th, 2020

Adapting a novel to the stage is a tricky business. A play needs to have a central action executed within a playing time of a few hours while a novel can be a rumination on multiple themes over hundreds of pages. Even a short novel can dive into a character's interior in a way a play can not. Theater is action, literature is thought. *My Name Is Lucy Barton*, Rona Munro's stage version of Elizabeth Strout's slim but powerful novel now presented by Manhattan Theater Club after a run in London, manages to combine the two strains in a moving evening featuring the luminous Laura Linney in a stunning solo—yet dual—performance.

Laura Linney in *My Name Is Lucy Barton*.
Credit: Matthew Murphy

Strout's fiction, including the Pulitzer Prize winning *Olive Kittredge*, focuses on the unspoken and missed connections between family members, friends, and lovers, usually from rural small towns. There isn't much in the way of plot in *Lucy Barton*, but the book and play take us on a heartbreaking journey as a writer dares to explore her devastating childhood and forge a necessary yet imperfect bond with her estranged mother.

The play, directed with economy and compassion by Richard Eyre, begin with Linney as Lucy entering Bob Crowley's minimal yet evocative set—a single hospital bed with a projection of the New York City skyline on the back drop, surrounded on three sides by the audience. Lucy is confined to the hospital for several weeks after what should have been a routine appendectomy. Her mother whom she hasn't seen in many years, is summoned from the tiny farming village of Amgash, Illinois. Linney plays both parts as they exchange stories of blighted lives in their hometown and tenderly touch the still raw wounds caused by Lucy's poverty-stricken growing up and her father's traumatic reaction to his service during World War II.

Linney delivers an incandescent dual performance, effortlessly switching back and forth between roles. She clearly delineates Lucy's desperate loneliness as a child and her growing confidence as an adult, as well as the mother's harsh, no-nonsense flintiness concealing her love for her child. Munro skillfully pares down and rearranges Strout's original text for maximum theatrical impact. She retains the central conflict—Lucy's struggle to find her own voice as a writer and to come to terms with her conflicted emotions about her family—without losing the piece's intimate atmosphere. It feels as if a friend is confiding a long-held secret and once it begins, we need to know what happens next. That's the essence of effective fiction and theater.

Ben Porter in *The Woman in Black.*
Credit: Jenny Anderson

Another theatrical version of a hard-to-adapt novel attempts a similar page-to-stage leap, though it's an entirely different genre. *The Woman in Black*, derived from Susan Hill's suspenser by Stephen Mallatratt, makes its long-delayed New York City debut. Set in the Hidden Club Car pub in the atmospheric McKittrick Hotel, where the immersive *Sleep No More* has been playing for the past several seasons, *Woman* is an intermittently entertaining ghost tale which takes quite a while to get to its goosebump-inducing chills. Hill's 1983 novel concerns a vengeful specter haunting an isolated English village and served as the basis of a 2012 film starring Daniel Radcliffe. Mallatratt inserts a framing device with the hero of the book, a milquetoast solicitor named Arthur Kipps (versatile David Acton), collaborating with an unnamed actor (commanding Ben Porter) on a stage version of the horror tale which he lived. This iteration first played a London pub in 1987 and went on to become the second-longest run in West End history, surpassed only by Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*.

There is much time-filling dialogue about Kipps not being a performer and stumbling amateurishly over his lines and blocking. Naturally, once the story-within-a-story takes over, the novice turns into a brilliant thespian, delivering incisive, varying interpretations of a slew of secondary roles while the unnamed actor assumes Kipps' part as the hero of the shocking tale. After an interminable exposition, we finally get into the haunted house and director Robin Herford, lighting designer Anshuman Bhatia, and sound designer Sebastian Frost (Rod Mead is credited creating the original sound) plunge us into a delightfully scary nightmare. But the shocks and screams, all unleashed in the last half-hour, hardly seem worth the long wait. The pub atmosphere is jolly and you can sip on your favorite cocktail to pass the time till the genuine frights arrive.

My Name Is Lucy Barton: Jan. 15—Feb. 29. Manhattan Theater Club at Samuel J. Friedman Theater, 261 W. 47th St., NYC. Mon—Wed 7pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm. Running time: 90 mins. with no intermission. $89—$189. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

The Woman in Black: Jan. 23—March 8. McKittrick Hotel, 530 W. 27th St., NYC. Mon, Wed—Fri 8pm, Sat 3pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm & 7pm. Running time: two hours with one intermission. $85—$95. (212) 564-1662. mckittrickhotel.com.

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