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Rewinding and Fast-Forwarding Life in *A Parallelogram*

David Sheward · Wednesday, August 9th, 2017

Bruce Norris' *A Parallelogram*, now at Second Stage Theater after productions at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company and Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum, certainly has a flashy gimmick which director Michael Greif employs with just the right touch of subtle spectacle in his crisp staging. Through means of a device resembling a TV remote, the central character Bee is able to rewind or flash-forward through moments of her life, reliving and altering her actions, but she discovers the ultimate outcome remains the same. These adjustments are cleverly accomplished thanks to Rachel Hauck's flexible set, Kenneth Posner's suggestive lighting, Matt Tierney's electronic sound design, and Greif's smart supervision. But this is not just the stage equivalent of that 2006 Adam Sandler movie *Click* which features a similar premise.



Celia Keenan-Bolger and Anita Gillette in *A Parallelogram*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Bee has plenty to reconsider in her jumbled life. There are cracks in her relationship with her current live-in boyfriend Jay who has left his wife and two small children for her. She has an unfulfilling job as a manager of a Rite-Aid and is beginning to be drawn to JJ, her hunky Latino handyman. And, through the means of her fast-forward device, she learns the whole world is in for major trouble. Can she make a positive change or is it all futile?

Norris asks the questions "Would we change if we knew the truth about ourselves and how our lives turn out? Is it possible to make a real difference in this crazy, self-destructive world?" That's a powerful theme and the playwright does afford some fascinating explorations of this existential dilemma but the central schtick of redoing scenes gets repetitive long before the evening ends. There are also several holes in the plot. Bee is brought her magical remote by a future version of herself who pops up in various guises, sometimes visible to others, sometimes not. The reasons for Bee 2's retro visit to her younger self are never made clear. But is the whole thing a hallucination? Even if the latter is true, in order for us to care about the outcome, there must be some internal logic within the illusion.



Stephen Kunken, Juan Castano, Celia Keenan-Bolger, and Anita Gillette in *A Parallelogram*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Fortunately, the adept four-person cast brings much shading to these confused characters. Celia Keenan-Bolger's Bee has warmth and humor as she struggles to find her way out of a

philosophical maze. Stephen Kunken gives a hilarious spin to Jay's self-absorption, launching into breathless monologues defending his narcissistic behavior, pausing for a split-second to allow Bee to have her say, and then either continuing or running out of the room to watch the football game on TV. Anita Gillette is sharply wry as the various future Bees and Juan Castano has a welcome charm as JJ, a relatively small role which could have been thrown away.

Norris has previously presented complex and layered puzzles in his plays, examining in depth such vital topics as racism (*Clybourne Park*), sexuality (*The Qualms*), sexual politics (*Domesticated*), and social responsibility (*The Pain and the Itch*). But *Parallelogram* comes across as a one-joke sketch stretched out to two acts.

Aug. 3—20. Second Stage Theater at the Tony Kiser Theater, 305 W. 43rd St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm and 7pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm and 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$86. (212) 246-4422. www.2st.com.

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