

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Sad Quartet: Rose Tattoo, Linda Vista, New Englanders, Heroes

David Sheward · Thursday, October 24th, 2019

“My life is unhappy. I want to change it and I don’t know how.” That’s the subtext of a lot of American drama and four productions currently on and Off-Broadway explore this trope of angst with insight and compassion. One is a neglected classic from Tennessee Williams, the poet of the frustrated and lonely, while the other three offer new perspectives on the search for self-fulfillment from established and rising playwrights. Surprisingly, the Williams play is the most optimistic and life-affirming of this sad quartet.



Marisa Tomei and Emun Elliott in *The Rose Tattoo*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

We associate Williams’ heroines such as Amanda Wingfield, Blanche DuBois, and Alexandra Del Lago with delusion and disappointment. But Serafina Delle Rosa, the passionate seamstress of *The Rose Tattoo* overcomes her illusions and finds happiness in facing the truth. Williams called *Tattoo* his “love-play to the world” and wrote it in celebration of his relationship with his lover Frank Merlo. Intended for Anna Magnani who would win an Oscar for the 1955 film version, the play is a comic-tragic ode to the power of love to transcend tragedy. Serafina, an Italian immigrant on the Gulf Coast, withdraws from the world when her truck-driver husband is killed while transporting illegal drugs for gangsters. Her teenage daughter is becoming a woman and her heart is revived by a sweet, clumsy clown named Alvaro Mangiacavallo (Italian for “Eat a horse”). Initially she stubbornly resists the reality of her child’s growing up, her dead husband’s infidelity, and Mangiacavallo’s advances by railing against her community, but gradually she succumbs to romance.



Marisa Tomei in *The Rose Tattoo*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Overshadowed by Williams’ powerhouses *Glass Menagerie*, *Streetcar Named Desire*, and *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, *Tattoo* is a gentle, funny romance and seldom performed. The current production at Roundabout Theater Company is only the third Broadway revival (Maureen Stapleton starred in the 1951 original and the 1966 revival, Mercedes Ruehl headlined a 1995 version.) Trip Cullman’s luminous production, previously seen at the Williamstown Theater Festival, gives Marisa Tomei’s intense Serafina plenty of air and space (reinforced by Mark Wendland’s lyrical set, though he does crowd the back of the stage with a flock of superfluous plastic flamingoes). The comic

moments which easily could have been too broad are lightly played. Tomei seamlessly makes the transition from wild, tantrum-throwing virago to gentle, desperate widow. Emun Elliott captures Alvaro's tenderhearted toughness and Ella Rubin infuses the daughter Rosa with determination and sass.



Cora Vander Broek, Ian Barford, and Chantal Thuy in *Linda Vista*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Like Serafina, Dick Wheeler, the misanthropic protagonist of Tracey Letts' *Linda Vista* at Second Stage's Hayes Theatre, is no picnic. He rails against Trump voters, all contemporary music and film (especially comic-book adaptations), and Bob Dylan winning the Nobel Prize for Literature as signs of cultural rot. Divorced and depressed over his failure as a photographer and husband and working at a dead-end job at age 50, Wheeler reluctantly reaches out for companionship with the outgoing Jules, a life coach (of course, he gets in a few cracks about her profession.) But unlike Serafina, he throws his chance for happiness away, rejecting Jules in favor of the emotionally unstable, much younger Minnie who is carrying the baby of her abusive ex-boyfriend. No big surprise that it all ends badly.

From the sound of him, you wouldn't want to spend over two and a half hours in Wheeler's company, but Letts skillfully shows us all the facets of this complex, compelling character so that we are never tempted to label him as a loser or treat him as an object of derision. Yet despite the protagonist's self-destructive narcissism, Letts has created a moving character similar to Chekhov's brooding heroes such as Uncle Vanya and Ivanov. The dialogue is funny without venturing into sitcom territory, exposing the quirks of Wheeler and his circle without mocking them. Dexter Bullard's direction gives us just the right combination of humorous snap and detail-laden pathos.



Ian Barford and Caroline Neff in *Linda Vista*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Ian Barford captures Wheeler's self-loathing at the root of his grouchiness as well as the spark of joy he has not quite successfully extinguished. Cora Vander Broek makes a sturdy Jules and Chantal Thuy's layered Minnie is much more than a toxic mess. Sally Murphy and Jim True-Frost truthfully expose the rifts in the marriage of Wheeler's best friends while Caroline Neff and Troy West provide insight into his co-workers.

The characters in Jeff Augustin's *The New Englanders* from Manhattan Theater Club at City Center Stage II are just as unhappy as Serafina and Wheeler, but they're whinier about their comfortable misery. Interracial gay couple Aaron (dignified but yearning Teagle F. Bougere) and Samuel (tender Patrick Breen) have lost the zip in their marriage while their teenage daughter Eisa (fiery Kara Young) aspires to be the next Lauryn Hill and obsessively fears being ordinary. This leads her into a battle of wills while her equally neurotic English teacher Laura (brittle, sarcastic Crystal Finn) who still hasn't gotten over losing big time on *Jeopardy*. Meanwhile, Aaron is hooking up with old flame Raul (sweet Javier Munoz), a drifter with the case of the glooms and his own daughter issues, and Samuel finds a friend in Atlas (sharp Adam Langdon), Eisa's classmate and drug dealer. Like Chekhov's three sisters, all six bemoan their unhappy lot at being trapped in a nowhere town.



Teagle F. Bougere and Kara Young in *The New Englanders*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

There are moments of wit and connection despite the over-reliance on coincidence as the characters meet and regroup in hardly believable pairings (Atlas and Samuel, Raul and Laura). Musings on race and gay-straight relations are often pointed but these characters often come across as overwhelmingly self-pitying. Fortunately, the professional cast endows this dreary un-self-aware sextette with vitality and spark and Saheem Ali directs with pace and punch.

Will Arbery depicts yet another group of teary-eyed souls dealing with loss and doubt in *Heroes of the Fourth Turning* at Playwrights Horizons. To continue the Chekhovian theme, this bunch is gathered together to mourn the absence of a cherished past, but feel powerless to move forward, sorta like the folks in *The Cherry Orchard*. They are recent graduates of a conservative Catholic university in Wyoming attending a celebration of their former professor's promotion to president. Each longs for the security of the campus and certainty of their Christian faith and traditional values in an uncertain and increasingly liberal society. Abortion, LGBT issues, racism, terrorism, Trump, and much more are all addressed. Arbery introduces right-wing viewpoints not usually encountered on New York stages and creates complex, ambiguous personalities rather than representatives of perspectives.



John Zdrojeski, Zoe Winters, Jeb Kraeger, Michele Pawk, and Julia McDermott in *Heroes of the Fourth Turning*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The playwright lays on the symbolism a bit thickly at times—the lights go out at irregular points, plunging everyone in the dark, and a deafening cacophony erupts from a broken-down generator as they speak past each other. But the dialogue is startlingly intelligent and these are real people. You may not agree with what they have to say, but you can understand their position (thanks to the author) and emotions (thanks to a precise job by director Danya Taymor and the empathetic five-person cast). Zoe Winters is burningly intense as a fast-taking ideologue. Jeb Kraeger achingly suppresses his emotions while John Zdrojeski and Julia McDermott let them spill out with eloquent force. Michele Pawk is devastatingly sharp as the Peggy Noonan-ish university president.

The title refers to historians William Strauss and Neil Howe's book that theorizes America is headed for a crisis or "turning." Arbery has skillfully crafted a moving, disturbing portrait of a massive turning of our nation and five of its citizens.

The Rose Tattoo: Oct. 15—Dec. 8. Roundabout Theatre Company at the American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. \$59—\$299. (212) 719-1300. www.roundabouttheatrecompany.org.

Linda Vista: Oct. 10—Nov. 10. Second Stage at the Hayes Theatre, 240 W. 44th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 7pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 40 mins. including intermission. \$79—\$149. (212) 541-4516. www.2st.com.

The New Englanders: Oct. 2—20. Manhattan Theatre Club at City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2:30pm & 7:30pm, Thu 1pm & 7:30pm, Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2:30pm &

7:30pm, Sun 2:30pm. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission. \$35. (212) 581-1212. www.nycitycenter.org.

Heroes of the Fourth Turning: Oct. 7—Nov. 10. Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue—Wed 7pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2:30pm & 8pm, Sun 2:30pm & 7:30pm. Running time: two hours with no intermission. \$59-\$99. (212) 279-4200. www.playwrightshorizons.com.

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