

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

School's In: *Prodigal Son* and *Women Without Men*

David Sheward · Wednesday, March 9th, 2016

New York City Center is playing host to two plays with academic settings. On the larger main stage, Manhattan Theatre Club is presenting *Prodigal Son*, John Patrick Shanley's new autobiographical play, which focuses on a troubled young student from the Bronx adjusting to a preppy New Hampshire private high school. In the small studio space, the Mint Theater Company offers Hazel Ellis' 1938 *Women Without Men*. This rarely-produced work concentrates on the teachers at an all-female academy in rural Ireland. Both are fascinating character profiles employing familiar tropes and revitalizing them or fleshing them out to their fulling potential.



Timothee Chalamet in *Prodigal Son*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Shanley employs the artist-as-a-young-man template to portray his own early education and the influence a caring set of teachers had on his development as a writer. The Shanley

stand-in, Jim Quinn (charismatic Timothee Chalamet), a brilliant but combative kid, earns a scholarship to the upper-crust Thomas More Preparatory School in the mid to late 1960s. He challenges the conformist attitudes of his tough-as-nails headmaster Carl Schmitt (solid-yet-tender-underneath Chris McGarry). The headmaster's compassionate wife Louise (caring Annika Boras) offers tea and sympathy. His biggest champion is English teacher Alan Hoffman (precise, complex Robert Sean Leonard) who sees promise in Jim, describing him as "the most interesting mess we have this year." Each of the adults has a secret of their own which plays in a part in their relationship to the troubled young protagonist. The main dramatic question is whether he will graduate despite brawling, drinking, and stealing.

The fluid and sharp script from Shanley, who also directs with subtlety, and a keenly well-observed performance from young Timothee Chalamet, rescue Jim from being seen as a self-centered know-it-all. Like his classic predecessors Holden Caulfield and Stephen Daedalus, Jim is a smart kid but he overindulges in his own existential angst. Shanley views his youthful flaws through a loving lens and asks the audience to do the same. "You remember fifteen," Jim addresses us at the start of the play as if begging our indulgence when judging his teenage follies. The noteworthy ensemble is completed by David Potters as Jim's nerdy, supportive roommate.



Kellie Overbey, Emily Walton, and Mary Bacon in *Women Without Men*.

Credit: Richard Termine

Meanwhile, across the lobby and down the hallway at City Center's smaller studio space, the Mint Theater Company is staging a play with a more conventional approach to similar material. *Women Without Men* also uses plot devices of clandestine criminal acts among students and teachers, but the underlying theme is the destructive pettiness that results from the degrading work conditions suffered by the female faculty. Newcomer Jean Wade (confident Emily Walton) struggles to find her place and make peace with her backbiting fellow teachers who snipe at each other in jealousy and frustration over low pay and a punishing workload.

You would think modern audiences would cringe at the portrayal of these pathetic women

as frustrated spinsters. One character even says married women with abusive husbands have a better situation than the dull grind of these sad instructresses. “At least tragedy is interesting,” she sniffs. But Ellis’ compassionate, detailed writing overcomes the social limits of her era, offering three-dimensional pictures of people living one-dimensional lives. Jenn Thompson directs with a sure hand and the proficient cast is perfect down to the smallest roles of three rebellious students. Kellie Overbey is particularly moving as the haughty Miss Connor who invests her whole existence in a never-completed manuscript on the history of beauty. At the play’s end, we see this woman’s entire bleak future on the map of Overbey’s crushed features.

After writing *Women Without Men*, Ellis, an Irish actor-playwright, married and retired from the stage. This involving production reaffirms the Mint’s mission to resurrect neglected gems.

Prodigal Son: Feb. 9—March 27. Manhattan Theatre Club at New York City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Tue., Wed., 7 p.m.; Thu.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission; \$90; (212) 581-1212 or www.nycitycenter.org.

Women Without Men: Feb. 25—March 26. Mint Theater Company at New York City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Tue.—Sat., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 2:30 p.m. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including one intermission; \$27.50—\$65; (212) 581-1212 or www.nycitycenter.org.

This review previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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