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Shows with Patti LuPone and Stock Are Familiar but Vital

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 15th, 2015

Though we've encountered their plot templates many times before, two Off-Broadway shows—*Shows for Days* at Lincoln Center's Mitzi Newhouse and *Of Good Stock* from MTC at City Center—provide vibrant evenings in the theater. Douglas Carter Beane's *Shows for Days* employs the reliable, semi-autobiographical memory-play framework wherein the mature narrator recalls his youthful transition into maturity with a domineering older woman playing a major role. Beane recounts his induction into the world of stage make-believe at a Pennsylvania community theater and the bizarre, fabulous creatures that inhabit it.



Dale Soules and Patti LuPone in *Shows for Days*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The charming Michael Urie is the author's stand-in Car, a 14-year-old yearning to break free from the confines of small-town mentality who encounters a larger world thanks to Irene, a bigger-than-life artistic director of a storefront troupe attempting to bring Ionesco, Genet, and Noel Coward to her 1970s suburban milieu. Since Irene is played by none other than Patti LuPone, the reigning life force of Broadway, she dominates the proceedings (even to the extent of relieving a texting audience member of her cellphone at the performance attended.) There are many (purposefully) melodramatic machinations revolving around backstage liaisons and keeping the tiny company alive as a wrecking ball may destroy John Lee Beatty's ramshackle set at any moment. Young Car predictably becomes enchanted with the stage and gets his heart broken before growing up and leaving for Broadway. Jerry Zaks stages this theatrical lovefest with speed and zest and Beane has a way with snappy dialogue, as he did in several previous works including the musicals *Xanadu* and *Lysistrata Jones* as well as *And the Little Dog Laughed* and *The Nance*. He also clearly adores his bombastic amateurs played with vigor by Urie, LuPone, Dale Soules, Lance Coadie Williams, Dale Soules, and Zoe Winters and that goes a long way towards overcoming an overly familiar story.



Jennifer Mudge, Heather Lind, and Alicia Silverstone in *Of Good Stock*

Credit: Joan Marcus

Melissa Ross' *Of Good Stock* also uses shopworn set-ups, combining the trusted country-weekend setting and trio-of-female-siblings trope for a retread of the dysfunctional family play. Eldest sister Jess Stockton (hence the title, get it?) is struggling with the after-effects of a mastectomy as she attempts to manage the lives of middle sister, Amy, and the youngest, Celia, while distancing

herself from supportive husband Fred. All three women are still reeling from the destructive narcissism of their late father, a famous author, and the early death of their mother. Amy is resentful because of the perceived neglect of her parents and channels her anger by obsessing over her upcoming wedding to shallow Josh. Commitment-phobic Celia plans to move in with the simplistic, good-natured Hunter, but fears she'll screw it up. The women and their men gather for a summer weekend at their childhood Cape Cod home (gorgeous set by Santo Loquasto), now owned by Jess, and alcohol-fueled confrontations are the order of the day. How many times have we seen this storyline before from Chekhov's trio longing for Moscow to similar siblings depicted in Paul Zindel's *And Miss Reardon Drinks a Little*, Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*, and Wendy Wasserstein's *The Sisters Rosensweig*?

Though her basic story offers nothing new, Ross's lines are sharp and well-observed and the solid cast delivers strong performances under Lynne Meadow's assured direction. The playwright mocks her own reliance on reliable formats. "I feel like I'm trapped in a bad chick flick," moans Jess, but thanks to Jennifer Mudge's clear-eyed liming of this tough-minded breast cancer patient, the line doesn't come across as ironic. Both Amy and Celia could have been obnoxious whiners, but Alicia Silverstone and Heather Lind find their sweet centers. Kelly AuCoin, Nate Miller, and Greg Keller are perfect foils as the men in their lives.

These two shows take the dictum that we all learned in high-school English—there are only about a dozen basic storylines in all of literature—and show that us inventive and hard-working playwrights can make them their own.

Shows for Days: June 29—Aug. 23. Mitzi Newhouse Theatre at Lincoln Center, 150 W. 65th St., NYC. Tue.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and ten mins. including one intermission; \$87; (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

Of Good Stock: June 30—July 26. Manhattan Theatre Club at 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: two hours including one intermission; \$90; (212) 581-1212 or www.citycenter.org.

This review previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com.

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