

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Siblings and Spirits at City Center

David Sheward · Thursday, February 19th, 2026

The two-actor cast of Ngozi Anyanwu's *The Monsters* at the intimate Stage II at City Center in a Manhattan Theater Club production, go through quite a workout in its 90-minute running time, both physically and emotionally. So does the audience. Anyanwu's tight and devastating script rings some familiar bells in the estranged-family division, but her script is honest and heartfelt. Her direction is well-paced and, with the aide of Cha See's lighting, creatively transforms Andrew Boyce's simple gym setting into a myriad of locales.



Aigner Mizzelle and Okieriete Onaodowan in *The Monsters*.

Credit: T. Charles Erickson

As the play opens, Big and Lil (short for Little) are disconnected African-American siblings, survivors of an abusive father. Big, whose real name is not revealed until the end of the play, is a champion mixed-martial arts fighter. His half-sister Lil (actual name: Josephine) attempts to resume their once close relationship after 15 years of silence. Gradually, their severed bond is knit back together as Big trains Lil in MMA. As she raises in the ring ranks, long buried resentments and secrets are revealed and their conflict erupts in a grueling grudge match. (Gerry Rodriguez is

the masterful fight director.)

Okieriete Onaodowan has the massive muscular presence to be convincing as a dominating fighter, and the acting skill to convey Big's sensitive hidden side. Aigner Mizzelle is equally versatile as the needy yet boisterous Lil, displaying both her brash exuberance and her concealed vulnerability. In one interesting piece of staging Anyanwu has the two break from a rigorous training session into an interpretative dance expressing their love and joy in each other's company. Rickey Tripp supplied the fluid dance movement, flowing from calisthenics to choreography.



Aigner Mizzelle and Okieriete Onaodowan in *The Monsters*.

Credit: T. Charles Erickson

Not surprisingly, the siblings reconcile but only after exposing their rage and resentment over having to express their emotions through violence. In other words, in order for society to respect them, they feel they have to become the monsters of the title. Anyanwu allows them to let their inner monsters go in a compassionate climax.

Meanwhile, in the same City Center building, a totally different theatrical experience has materialized in the form of Encores!' concert staging of *High Spirits*, the long neglected 1964 musical version of Noel Coward's frothy and ghostly comedy *Blithe Spirit*. Coward's tightly constructed play about a writer accidentally summoning the specter of his first wife and thus disrupting his current marriage has had several notable Broadway, regional and stock productions since its debut in the 1940s. But this musical by Hugh Martin and Timothy Gray (who collaborated on the book, music and lyrics) vanished without a trace after 375 performances. Despite delightful star turns by Tammy Grimes and Beatrice Lillie, it was overwhelmed by smash hits *Hello, Dolly!* and *Funny Girl*, garnering no Tonys.



Andrea Martin in *High Spirits*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The book adheres closely to Coward's original, but adding comedy numbers for the medium role (originally played by Lillie) and giving her a side line as the proprietor of spiritually-centered coffee shop. This location allows for the chorus to play beatniks. Martin and Gray's songs are sparkling and funny, often sporting ingenious rhymes and images. In "Home Sweet Heaven," the ghost Elvira merrily sings of Casanova attempting to flirt with Gertrude Stein and Joan of Arc bringing the spark to every party.

This type of obscure tuner with several worthy elements is exactly the type of production to fulfill Encores!'s mission statement, bringing neglected musicals down from the attic for another look. Director Jessica Stone has blown away the cobwebs and polished up the old darling with a spiffy, spooky, self-referential but still clever staging and music director Mary-Mitchell Campbell delivers a splendidly rich performance of the score, with a full 29-piece orchestra.

The concert version employs Coward himself as a narrator, elegantly embodied by Campbell Scott who also plays Dr. Bradman. Binders with scripts are used, and often ingeniously worked into the staging. For example, Andrea Martin as the zany medium has her script pasted on the back of her ouija board and refers to it as she sings.

That's just of a sample of Stone's charming work. Fabrics fly through the air, a chorus of bicycles pedals along, and ghosts, tables and chairs levitate. (Skylar Fox is credited with Magic and Illusions.)



Phillipa Soo and Steven Pasquale in *High Spirits*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The company is obviously enjoying themselves. Real-life husband and wife Steven Pasquale and Phillipa Soo drily trade barbs with aplomb as Charles Condomine and his second, living wife Ruth. Katrina Lenk is a silvery, silken slyph as the otherworldly Elvira. Andrea Martin is riotously and uninhibitedly eccentric as the daffy medium. Rachel Dratch mugs skillfully as the put-upon maid Edith. As noted, Scott is a martini-dry delight as the Cowardly narrator and Dr. Bradman and Jennifer Sanchez is appropriately ditzy as his wife.

High Spirits is a dated affair and there is little chance of a full-scale Broadway revival. So it's a treat to see this gorgeous ghost of another musical-comedy era briefly brought back to life.

***The Monsters*: Feb. 11-March 22. Manhattan Theater Club in association with Two River Theater at New York City Center Stage II, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Running time: one hour and 40 mins. with no intermission. nycitycenter.org.**

***High Spirits*: Feb. 4—15. Encores! at New York City Center, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. nycitycenter.org.**

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