

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Something For Everyone

Sylvie · Wednesday, November 22nd, 2017

Thanksgiving. Three plays. As Polonius might have said: historical, hysterical and, mmm, geriatric.

Let's go with geriatric first. It's not an insult; it's a good adjective in the most age-appropriate sense for *Chasing Mem'ries*, the tender, well-intended, sweetly funny show at The Geffen Playhouse. Millennials won't relate, but anyone who has suffered major loss may find it comforting.

Is that enough? Not really. But the cast of three seasoned actors — Robert Forster, Scott Kradolfer and the remarkable Tyne Daly — makes the most of what turns out to be pretty skimpy entertainment.

Victoria (Daly) has just lost her husband Franklin (Forster) and is rummaging through her attic in search of her long past and, in a certain sense, her shorter future. Meanwhile, unseen by us, a group of friends is gathering in the yard to celebrate Franklin's life.

Now and then, Victoria yells for Franklin much as she did in life — no sentimentality there — and now and then Franklin, the ghost, obligingly shows up. So does their middle-aged son Mason (Kradolfer), who arrives in the flesh to help his mother get through this moment and join the waiting guests downstairs. Their bit of chitchat leads him to report on his own impending crisis; his astronaut wife has informed him, as she sailed off to Mars, that she's not sure she wants to be married any more...



Tyne Daly & Scott Kradolfer in *Chasing Mem'ries* at The Geffen Playhouse. Photo Chris Whitaker.

Is this contrived? By the time Daly climbs to the attic window to give a stern speech to the friends and family below, we know *how* contrived it is, even if that speech is Daly's only chance to show us what an indomitable performer she can be. She's the anchor, and a good thing too, or this little play with music would quietly float away. It's amazing what that woman can do by just raising an eyebrow, engaging with a bit of singing — or dressing down a crowd.

It helps that Josh Ravetch's dialogue is smart and brittle (he also directed), but *Chasing Mem'ries* remains a pretty narrow exercise in nostalgia, punctuated by a surprisingly few snippets of melody and song, lyrics courtesy of Alan and Marilyn Bergman with familiar music by Dave Grusin, Marvin Hamlisch, Michel Legrand and others. Even as understated as she is here, Daly holds this

little enterprise together. It is otherwise pretty thin gruel, inviting some responsive crowd affection and the occasional tear.

But while *Chasing Mem'ries* may find many a happy home with community players, who will relish the sentiment involved and the small if rewarding demands it makes on its cast of three, this show's professional ambitions, assuming it has them, will be limited.



Tyne Daly & Robert Forster in *Chasing Mem'ries* at the Geffen. Photo by Chris Whitaker.

Tender and sweet could not be said of the vibrant Odyssey Theatre Ensemble's production of *The Dance of Death*, August Strindberg's 1901 tornado of a play about a long and vicious marriage whose battling partners wish they knew how to end, yet whose daily skirmishes sustain them. It was presented at The Odyssey in a dizzying, sharply trimmed down adaptation by playwright Conor McPherson that, like a rich stew made richer by cooking down its excesses, delivered an intense battle of the sexes seasoned with devilish laughter and unsettling hysterics. I was unable to get to this production sooner and I'm sorry to report that it closed last Sunday.



l-r, Jeff Lebeau, Darrell Larson & Lizzy Kimball in *The Dance of Death* at The Odyssey. Photo Ron Sossi.

But it still deserves a mention because another top-notch cast of three delivered this absolute antidote to any nostalgia, with its furious string of ambushes and unstoppable surprise attacks. The love that once may have existed between The Captain (Darrell Larson) and his wife Alice (Lizzy Kimball) has curdled into venom, leaving them to feed on its virulence for strategic entertainment and survival. Into this fraught atmosphere steps Alice's innocent cousin Kurt (Jeff Lebeau), a pleasant, slightly dull fellow who becomes the unwitting whipping boy for the couple's daily mayhem.

McPherson's tightened script reduces the number of characters, altering the mood of the piece down to an unexpected comic essence, making the sometimes musty play relate much better to today's jaded audiences. Ron Sossi, founder of the Odyssey (and still presiding over it in its 48th year), staged this war of words with a complete commitment to its wickedness and antic humor. He ensured that the pace never let up, while Larson, Kimball and Lebeau delivered their three savagely memorable performances. It was a powerful production of a play magnificently rejuvenated for a new and different century that deserved a longer run and one must hope they find a way to bring it back unchanged.

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Currently reigning at The Pasadena Playhouse is *King Charles III*. The Queen has died. Long live the King. This is, of course, a *mock* historical take on coming events in Britain. But as imagined by the fertile mind of playwright Mike Bartlett, it offers a pretty gripping vision of potential political machinations. And it is inconspicuously spoken in Shakespearean blank verse, if you please, which is a bit of a marvel in and of itself.

The cast of characters is familiar. We have Camilla and Charles (soon to be crowned the III), Diana's sons Harry and William and William's wife Kate Middleton, plus assorted political figures, and the practiced self-effacing Buckingham Palace staff.

What plunges Charles' succession into chaos is that Parliament has voted into law a bill limiting freedom of the press and Charles, as the new king, must sign it. This signing is a purely ceremonial step. But Charles, who does not approve of restricting the press, won't sign. He digs in his heels, upsetting centuries of precedent and tradition.



Jim Abele in *King Charles III* at The Pasadena Playhouse. Photo Jenny Graham.

Will he succeed in undoing what Parliament has done? For me to know and for you to find out. No spoilers offered here, but the subsequent events do become something of a page-turner. The play is as much a political thriller as it is an intriguing look at, well, one man's version of history in the making.

Director Michael Michetti has made the most of many staging opportunities offered by this circumstance, or should I say pomp and circumstance. Not since The Playhouse's production of *The Originalist* has it put on a better or more sumptuous production, on a simple and effective colonnaded set by David Meyer, with nicely complementary lighting by Elizabeth Harper, clear sound by Peter Bayne and opulent ceremonial costumes by Alex Jaeger that embellish the play without turning it into a meaningless pageant. Best of all, Michetti corralled the participation of the Pasadena Master Chorale to superbly dramatic effect — first in a moving and impressively sung funeral procession that opens the production, and later in the regal coronation scene that closes it.

But it's what comes between these book-ending events that captures our attention. Jim Abele unquestionably carries the play as King Charles, while Adam Haas Hunter as his son William, grows steadily more forceful in what turns out to be a far more complex role than expected. Not all of the casting is quite this commanding. Meghan Andrews as Kate could display a more regal comportment in her pivotal role, and Sarah Hollis as Harry's most recent heartthrob, the commoner Jess, could strike a more convincing balance between the brazenly unclassy side of her personality and the quick intelligence that drew Harry to her in the first place.



l-r, Jim Abele, Mark Capri, Dylan Saunders & Laura Gardner in *King Charles III* at The Pasadena Playhouse. Photo: Jenny Graham.

The political struggle, subtle and not-so-subtle, is well matched by the unavoidable familial one, and for a while all bets are off. But leave it to the commoners — Kate, Prince Harry and Jess — to point the way and come up with a solution of sorts. As for any further commentary, you won't get it from me.

My lips are sealed. You'll have to see the play.

Top image: Sarah Hollis & Dylan Saunders in a scene from King Charles III at The Pasadena Playhouse. Photo by Jenny Graham.

PERFORMANCE CALENDARS

WHAT : *Chasing Mem'ries*

WHERE: Gil Cates Theater at The Geffen Playhouse, 10886 Le Conte Avenue, Los Angeles CA

90024.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays 3 & 8pm; Sundays, 2 & 7pm. Ends December 17.

HOW: Tickets are \$25-\$0, available at www.geffenplayhouse.org (fees may apply) or at 310.208.5454, or in person at The Geffen Playhouse box office.

WHAT : *King Charles III*

WHERE: The Pasadena Playhouse, 39 South El Molino Avenue, Pasadena CA 91101.

WHEN: Wednesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2 & 8pm; Sundays, 2 & 7pm. Ends Dec. 3. No performance tonight (Thanksgiving) and no 7pm performance on Nov. 26. There will be an added performance Tuesday, Nov. 28, 8pm.

HOW: Tickets are \$25-\$96, available at www.PasadenaPlayhouse.org or at 626.356.7529 or in person at the Playhouse box office.

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