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Stars Make and Break Hillary, Burn

David Sheward · Wednesday, May 1st, 2019

Star turns can make or break a production. Two recent Broadway openings feature big-name leads, but their effects on their respective shows are startlingly different. In *Hillary and Clinton*, Laurie Metcalf and John Lithgow make Lucas Hnath's intriguing behind-the-scenes political premise into a gripping portrait of a complex marriage. In *Burn This*, a mismatched Adam Driver and Keri Russell drag down Lanford Wilson's supposedly explosive romance to the ho-hum level.

Hnath's tight and fascinating script focuses on Hillary Clinton's failed 2008 presidential bid and how her heavily-baggaed union with the former chief executive skewered her career in public service. The very title of the play indicates their unequal footing.



John Lithgow and Laurie Metcalf in *Hillary and Clinton*.

Credit: Julieta Cervantes

The setting is a drab New Hampshire hotel suite (Chloe Bamford provides the stark setting) as Hillary (Metcalf at her incandescent jittery best) bemoans her floundering campaign for the Democratic nomination against rising star Barack Obama (played with quiet authority by Peter Francis James). Unexpectedly, her charismatic, troublesome spouse Bill (Lithgow in a masterful turn) shows up ready to dispense advice and move cash into her depleted coffers.

In a snappy, idea-packed 90 minutes, Hnath not only addresses a plethora of contemporary concerns about our body politic (personality vs. policy, story vs. reality, substances vs. flash), but also, as he did with Ibsen's Nora and Torvald in *A Doll's House, Part 2*, creates an incisive dissection of a famous couple's push-pull connection. The playwright adds layers of his own to the pair's very public history and casts a cynical eye on how we elect our leaders. In examining the turning point of Mrs. Clinton's quest for the White House in her own right, he offers many uncomfortable observations on sexism, the power of the press, and the shallowness of the American voter. In a particularly brilliant monologue, Hillary explains how her "story" as a candidate has been distorted by Bill's infidelities and, because of his personal charisma, he emerged unscathed while she got the public's animosity for not divorcing him.



Laurie Metcalf and John Lithgow in *Hillary and Clinton*.

Credit: Julieta Cervantes

Metcalf, who also starred as Nora in Hnath's *Doll's House* sequel, once again gives new life and

blood to a figure we thought we knew. Her Hillary is vulnerable and troubled as well as razor smart and calculating. Neither she nor Lithgow, in an equally multi-dimensional performance, stoop to imitation, but pursue their objectives with a laser-like specificity. Lithgow captures Bill Clinton's easy charm, ruthless ambition, and reckless narcissism. The real triumph of this dual act and the spark that fires up the engine of the play is the love between these characters the actors convey and how it drives their actions despite the obstacles it creates for their career goals. Even as they coolly discuss ending their marriage for Hillary's political advantage, you can still feel their mutual affection.

Joe Matello delivers his usual economical, unfussy staging with several inspired moments. Watch as Bill literally steps over a supine Hillary to get at her recalcitrant campaign manager (an intense Zak Orth), indicating he's willing to walk all over his wife to dominate an argument. It's a funny, clever piece of business in a smart, entertaining comedy featuring two of our brightest stage stars.

Everything Metcalf and Lithgow do is in service of their play and establishing their characters, but Adam Driver and Keri Russell in the revival of Wilson's 1987 *Burn This* seem to be in different worlds. We believe Metcalf and Lithgow have been married and through the mill for decades, but Driver and Russell, who are supposed to be wildly attracted, appear to barely acknowledge each other. The essential fiery chemistry alluded to in the title is missing.



Adam Driver and Keri Russell in *Burn This*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

Wilson's play of unlikely passion focuses on dancer-choreographer Anna and the mysterious and volatile Pale, the older brother of Robbie, her gay dancing partner who has died in a boating accident with his lover Dominic. Pale is a star part. Grieving for his sibling, he crashes into Anna and her roommate Larry's loft apartment like a blazing comet, spouting colorful invective on the frustrations of NYC parking, their scummy neighborhood, his homophobic anger at Robbie's being gay, and finally drowns his sorrow in Anna's arms. In the original production, John Malkovich exploded like a ton of dynamite, inspiring comparisons to Brando in *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Driver has the right imposing physique and physicality for the role, but he comes across as a comically clumsy oaf, garnering huge laughs for Pale's non-sequitor monologues, but lacking menace. Malkovich made you feel he would kill you at any moment, Driver just makes you want to hug him like a teddy bear.



Adam Driver in *Burn This*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

To compound the production's problems, Russell barely registers as the vacillating Anna who seesaws between the crude but vital Pale and the refined, rich, but safe Burton. Mainly known for her TV work on *Felicity* and *The Americans*, Russell fails to bring any weight to the table. In 1987, Joan Allen found the spice in the somewhat bland heroine, winning a Tony Award for her efforts. But this Anna's inner struggle over lovers is no more important to her than choosing a new brand of coffee. When she tries to throw Pale out of her life it should be tearing her apart, instead she's inconvenienced.

Fortunately, Derek McLane's detailed loft set with its huge windows offering a cityscape view is nice to look at and director Michael Mayer wisely emphasizes Wilson's wit. Brandon Uranowitz

solidly lands each of Larry's comic relief zingers. David Furr is an attractive and manly Burton. It makes no sense that Anna would dump him for a goofy Pale, but that's what happens when stars are not aligned as they are in *Hillary and Clinton*.

Hillary and Clinton: April 18—July 21. Golden Theater, 252 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: One hour and 30 mins. with no intermission. \$39—\$159. (212) 239-6200. (212) www.telecharge.com.

Burn This: April 16—July 14. Hudson Theater, Tue 7pm, Wed 2pm & 8pm, Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. \$59—\$315. (855) 801-5876. www.thehudsononbroadway.com.

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