

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Stumbling Arrival & Departure

Sylvie · Wednesday, July 18th, 2018

There are a few too many surprises in The Fountain Theatre's recent unveiling of *Arrival & Departure*, a much touted and somewhat overproduced world premiere of a new play "inspired" by Noël Coward's *Brief Encounter*, written and directed by Stephen Sachs, an Artistic Co-Director of The Fountain.

Brief Encounter, an admired and enduring 1945 film classic, directed by David Lean, chronicles two strangers' accidental encounter in a train station, their instant attraction, unconsummated love affair and necessary parting (they're each married to other people). Its success owed a great deal to its incandescent lead performers – Trevor Howard and the slightly dowdy Celia Johnson.



Deanne Bray & Troy Kotsur in *Arrival & Departure* at The Fountain Theatre.

The first, most intriguing and socially commendable surprise at The Fountain is Sachs' decision to use deaf and speaking actors in those roles. Using them, however, makes certain demands. The actors (and audience) are aided by American Sign Language, spoken English and open captions that pop up all over the superior video projections generated throughout by Nicholas E. Santiago.

These captions constitute a kind of running commentary, overlaid as they are on Matthew G. Hill's excellent subway station setting. The captions enhance and augment the text but also split up our attention. (This is an established consequence of using supertitles, open captions or whatever else one chooses to call them, although these, being writ large and vividly, pose less of a problem than most.)

The second and bigger surprise is that the lead actors — Troy Kotsur as Sam and Deanne Bray as Emily — were both born deaf and also happen to be married to each other. You'd assume that a real-life marriage would go some distance to ensure good chemistry on stage. But the third surprise is how inert and dispassionate their on-stage relationship remains, the consequence of some pretty wooden acting by both parties in a play whose core cries out for passion and excitement above all else.



Jessica Jade Andres & Shon Fuller in *Arrival & Departure* at The Fountain Theatre.

There are some nice moments from Shon Fuller as Russell, the station security guard who has a serious crush on Mya, the keeper of the station donut shop, played by Jessica Jade Andres, but it's

not enough to fill in the romantic blanks. Because Sachs' script adopts such a fractured structure that often amounts to brief, almost cinematic snatches of scenes that swing wildly among people who talk to each other, people who talk for them or people talking at a smart phone screen (a teenage daughter's incessant texting, among other distractions), *Arrival & Departure* devolves into a kind of theatrical *coitus interruptus*.

In brief, these are too many surprises of the wrong kind and they include one more. Sachs, who has written a number of very successful plays, delivers an unusually flat and mundane text for this one. Certainly the choppy scenes and the diversion of attention dictated by the complicated delivery of the play become a big issue. The weakness of the acting, perhaps hampered by the play's structure and direction, plays into this as well.

Finally, the plot injects religion into a story that provides no real reason for it. Emily, who tells us she was a nonbeliever when she married Doug (Brian Robert Burns), is about to be baptized into her husband's church. This information comes out of left field and remains an inorganic fact, divorced from the rest of the story. It is unpersuasive, unsubstantiated and feels mostly like an uninvited guest. This from a theatre that just has just come off of a triumphant run with Andrew Posner's adaptation of Chaim Potok's *The Chosen*, which is all about religion.



Aurelia Myers & Brian Robert Burns in *Arrival & Departure* at The Fountain Theatre.

Also unexpected is that the production's technical and physical elements have rarely been so startlingly lavish and well done on The Fountain's small stage. Santiago's projections are exceptional, as is David Franco's nicely choreographed movement of the milling subway crowds. Hill's subway setting is a winning duplication, even as it underserves the scenes that are meant to take place elsewhere, such as a movie theatre, a restaurant, a classroom and especially Emily and Doug's home and the room where daughter Jule (Aurelia Myers) spends so much time texting (never a dynamic tool).

The end result leaves the essential core of *Arrival & Departure* emotionally vacant, reminiscent of those sumptuous cakes in bakery windows that are built over hollow cardboard shells. The outer gloss is all there, while the flavorful interior is not.



Deanne Bray & Troy Kotsur in *Arrival & Departure* at The Fountain Theatre.

The Fountain has a storied history of good productions. It is not accustomed to failures, and certainly not one of this magnitude. What to make of it all is puzzling. It's as if a momentary blinding struck a company that is normally so clairvoyant. Somewhere along the line something went wrong. Call it an aberration, a delusion, some bad choices. Call it anything you like.

And move on.

Top image: The cast of Arrival & Departure at The Fountain Theatre.

Photos by Ed Krieger

WHAT: *Arrival & Departure* (Note: this play is performed by Hearing and Deaf actors in an

integrated, blend of open captioning, American Sign Language and spoken English.)

WHERE: The Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Ave., Los Angeles CA 90029.

WHEN: Fridays, 8pm: July 20, 27; Aug. 3, 10, 17, 24, 31; Sept. 7, 14, 21, 28; **Saturdays, 8pm:** July 21, 28; Aug. 4, 11, 18, 25; Sept. 1, 8, 15, 22, 29; **Sundays, 2pm:** July 22, 29; Aug. 5, 12, 19, 26; Sept. 2, 9, 16, 23, 30. Ends Sept. 30.

HOW: Tickets: \$20 – \$40, available at www.FountainTheatre.com or 323.663.1525.

Pay-What-You-Want on selected MONDAYS, 8pm: subject to availability. July 23, 30; Aug. 6, 13, 20; Sept. 10, 17, 24, ONLY.

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