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The Designated Mourner: A Conversation with the Self

Sylvie · Wednesday, May 17th, 2017

In the opening lines of his play, *The Designated Mourner*, Wallace Shawn explains what that means. When a clan or tribe becomes extinct and there is no one left who knew of it or the people in it, someone from another clan or tribe is chosen to be the "rememberer" — the person "designated" to mourn the passing of that now extinct family, world, tribe, nation or civilization.

If you attend this revival of *The Designated Mourner* now on stage at Redcat downtown, you will need two things: attentiveness and patience. The show is long and its pace is intentionally deliberate. I believe it will hold your attention as it did mine. But it is an uncommon creature — less a play than a stream-of-consciousness conversation held with the self (and about the self), also held with you, the audience, and occasionally held with the other two actors on stage. It is about the reality or unreality of everything, the passage of time and the gradual disappearance of worlds, including love, marriage, literature, society and life itself.

Shawn is a writer fascinated by concepts and ideas. His plays linger over them exploring their every corner. *Designated Mourner*, which dates back to the mid 1990s, is a philosophical rumination; a spoken dissertation. It is the tale of three people related to each other in various ways, but it is also about many of the other people connected to them socially or professionally and about their collective blindness as they witness the unexpected passing of the world they all inhabit — *their* world as only they could know it — and about how that passing affects them.

Heavy-duty stuff. But Shawn treads lightly, even over aspects of the story that are not light at all. That are, in fact, horrific. And that relate in uncomfortable ways to the world we live in now. He paints with words, even when talking about an undefined wave of violence that can be ignored but cannot be denied, murderous, authoritarian events that overtake people who choose to pretend that such things cannot be happening in their comfort zones. And there is humor in these ruminations, as well as observations that any human being with half a brain will recognize and acknowledge as entirely true and possible. But they also are the kind of musings that many would prefer, at their peril, to pretend cannot happen here. Or now.

Wallace Shawn in *The Designated Mourner* at Redcat.

Of the three characters on stage, Jack (playwright Wallace Shawn) and Judy (Deborah Eisenberg, Shawn's real-life partner) are married to each other and living a good deal of the time with her father, Howard (Larry Pine). The supercilious Howard has heft, a certain standing in intellectual circles and can be, as self-important people often are, quite irritating. Judy is devoted to her father

in a way that Jack, who describes himself primarily as “a former student of English literature who… went downhill from there,” definitely is not. But then Jack and Judy seem to have a loose if sincere sort of on-and-off love for one another, that is easily supplanted when almost any random occasion arises.

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Not much recommends these individuals. Their lives feel largely idle, spent mostly, it seems, on catty chatter and gossipy evaluations of their hermetic little circle of equally catty friends. When the unexplained acts of violence begin to invade their rarefied world, they choose to not pay a great deal of attention, until things start to fester and affect them directly and they no longer can ignore the situation.

Relations among Judy, Howard and Jack, our designated spokesperson and mourner, are clinical. You won’t like or dislike these three, because you won’t get to know them well enough to do either. In the long run, we begin to understand that, seen through this lens, they typify an elitist and self-absorbed selection of humanity. After all, no one ever promised this would be an examination of a happily domesticated and incurious one. All that is required of the audience is that it appreciate the truthfulness of Jack’s vision of who they all are. A lot of what we see in them that is not pretty or attractive, we also can see in ourselves, precisely because Jack delivers an unvarnished rather than a flattering assessment. And that’s the point.

Wallace Shawn and Deborah Eisenberg in *The Designated Mourner* At Redcat

The acting by all three performers (who also comprised the original New York cast in 2000, with Gregory also directing) is on point, and Gregory’s staging specific in its pacing and dispassionate intent. Eugene Lee’s barebones set is a means to an end, symbolic of the anemia of these people’s lives. The mercifully brief use of microphones in the second half is only purposeful if their function serves as one more way to distance these characters from one another and from us, but the mics (which malfunctioned some on opening night) otherwise feel superfluous. The entire production broadcasts an aura of queasy *malaise,* a reserve tinged with sadness and mild contempt that the calculated absence of a curtain call only emphasizes.

l-r, Larry Pine, Wallace Shawn and Deborah Eisenebrg in *The Designated Mourner* at Redcat.

At a running time of three hours, *Designated Mourner* is a static, sobering inward stare at our inhuman race, but it is not for all markets. It will, however, reward those with the philosophical appetite to listen and to sit through it.

Top image: l-r, Wallace Shawn, Larry Pine, Deborah Eisenberg in The Designated Mourner *at Redcat.*

Photos by Lawrence K. Ho

WHAT: *The Designated Mourner*

WHERE: Redcat, 631 West 2nd Street, Los Angeles, CA 90012

WHEN: Tuesday-Saturday, 8pm; Sunday 3pm. Ends May 21.

HOW: Tickets $50-$55 (general audience); $40-$45 (members & students); $25-$30. Available at the box office or at 237.213.2800.

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