

Cultural Daily

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Three Broadway Shows Disappoint Despite Big Stars

David Sheward · Wednesday, October 14th, 2015

The fall Broadway season is in full swing with a trio of star-studded revivals of small-cast plays, each failing their author's intent by varying degrees. Sam Shepherd's *Fool for Love*, Harold Pinter's *Old Times*, and D.L. Coburn's *The Gin Game* present dark visions of human connections and the clash of memory and personality, but only *Fool* approaches the play's full impact. Even that one falls short.



Sam Rockwell and Nina Arianda in *Fool for Love*

Credit: Joan Marcus

As the curtain rises on Dane Laffrey's desolate Mojave Desert motel setting, we know we're in Shephard country—a lonely place where cowboys and good ole gals bluster to conceal their desperation. Three scruffy characters sit in silence for several seconds but you can feel the tension. Nina Arianda and Sam Rockwell are May and Eddie, former lovers with a deeper, tragic bond. Gordon Joseph Weiss as The Old Man sits just outside the scene, not really there, but very present in the minds of the other two. May and Eddie have an explosive on-again, off-again relationship which Eddie wants to renew as May is trying to get on with her life. She's awaiting Martin, a new gentleman caller, but Eddie refuses to leave. Fireworks supposedly ensue when Martin shows up and we learn the true nature of the lovers' link.

Director Daniel Aukin's production for Manhattan Theatre Club, transferred from the Williamstown Theatre Festival, has the right atmosphere of dusty anguish, abetted by Lafferty's sleazy setting, Justin Townsend's stark lighting and Ryan Rumery's haunting sound design. But, despite solid performances, Arianda and Rockwell fail to generate the necessary lava-like temperatures to fully melt the audience's butter. Weiss is an arresting figure as the spectral Old Man and Tom Pelphrey is perfect as the confused Martin, an ordinary guy who's wandered into an emotional minefield.



Kelly Reilly, Eve Best, and Clive Owen in *Old Times*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

While *Fool* wants to be volcanic, Douglas Hodge's distractingly showy production of Pinter's *Old Times* for the Roundabout Theatre Company is frozen, literally. Christine Jones' bizarre set is dominated by a slab of ice which serves as a perfect metaphor for this chilly staging. Pinter's 1971 triangular drama concerns the slipperiness of recollection. Married Deeley and Kate entertain

Anna, Kate's friend and roommate from their early days in London. As the weird evening progress, bits of the past slip out and a hazy, uncertain puzzle emerged. We don't know what's true and what isn't. Did Deely know Anna in the past? Is Anna really dead? Did Anna steal Kate's underwear and were they more than just flatmates?

Hodge directs a leering Clive Owen, an overacting Eve Best, and an arch Kate Reilly, to play the rivalries and power struggles right on the surface rather than burying them in subtext as in most Pinter productions. In addition to that hunk of ice, Jones' set features rock formations, a revolving living room, and an enormous backdrop of concentric circles, all of which remove us from the central action. The outsized environment seemed more appropriate for a Wagnerian opera directed by Robert Wilson. Strobe lights and an intrusive rock underscore by Radiohead frontman Thom Yorke further push us away from Pinter's subtle conundrum of a play.



Cicely Tyson and James Earl Jones in *The Gin Game*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The Gin Game also disappoints. D.L. Coburn's 1977 Pulitzer Prize winner returns to Broadway with two highly-touted stars—James Earl Jones and Cicely Tyson. The casting might lead you to expect a powerhouse confrontation, but Leonard Foglia's staging offers a sitcom. Jones and Tyson are Weller and Fonsia, a pair of abandoned senior citizens playing gin in a depressing elder residence (wonderfully detailed set by Riccardo Hernandez). They attempt to become friends but Fonsia's endless winning streak sets off Weller's explosive temper. The game is a metaphor for the mismatched couple's extended relationships with their now-absent families—Weller cannot deal with unexpected losses while Fonsia cannot resist judging and controlling. It's no surprise these unpleasant people have no visitors. But Tyson plays Fonsia as a sweet old lady, only slightly showing her mean streak. Jones does not succumb to such tricks and makes Weller a sharp-witted but difficult codger whose inner grouch pops out at the slightest provocation.

As a result, Jones' Weller comes across a bully menacing Tyson's coquettish Fonsia and we get an episode of *The Golden Girls*, complete with old-age jokes, rather than a slyly observed comedy of two lonely individuals unable to escape their self-imposed isolation. There are plenty of laughs, but *The Gin Game*, like the other recent openings, deserved to be dealt a better hand.

Fool for Love: Oct. 8—Dec. 13. Manhattan Theatre Club at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, 261 W. 47th St., NYC. Tue., Wed., 7 p.m.; Thu.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: One hour and 15 mins. with no intermission; \$70—\$150. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

Old Times: Oct. 6—Nov. 29. Roundabout Theatre Company at the American Airline Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: One hour and 15 minutes with no intermission; \$67-\$137. (212) 719-1300 or www.roundabouttheatre.org.

The Gin Game: Oct. 14— John Golden Theatre, 252 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m. Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours including one intermission; \$75—\$141. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

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