

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Tiny Beautiful Things: Advice Taken & Given

Sylvie · Wednesday, April 17th, 2019

Dear Sugar:

I was really looking forward to seeing your adaptation of Cheryl Strayed's book last Sunday at The Pasadena Playhouse—which happens to be my very special alma mater. It's been a joy to see how it has come alive under Danny Feldman's leadership after some pretty rough decades. That guy seems to know what he's doing. So I was very well prepared for the show and the fact that you were in it. I had even read your terrific adaptation of Cheryl's book before I came. The weather was fantastic. A five pm start is such a good springtime idea. All things pointed to a great evening of theatre.



Nia Vardalos, adapter & as Sugar in *Tiny Beautiful Things* at The Pasadena Playhouse.

So that is why I'm writing. I was not at all prepared for disappointment. I know, you told us in your adaptation about all the known unknowns and the unknown unknowns, and let me add that the way you told it was a lot funnier than Donald Rumsfeld. I loved it. So I expected to get the same charge from seeing the play as I had from reading your exquisite selections from the smart and compassionate advice Strayed dispensed to her letter writers on the Rumpus website and then collected in her book.

I also read the brief introduction you gave *Tiny Beautiful Things* in the Playhouse program explaining how the play came to be, how journalist Marshall Heyman shared it with his friend Thomas Kail, the director of *Hamilton* and *In the Heights*, and how Kail gave it to you to read, suggesting it would make a good play.

Well, he was right of course, as I now know from having read it myself. And I'm grateful to director Sherri Eden Barber for agreeing to recreate Thomas Kail's direction. The dialogue you chose to use was delicious, some of it was hilarious and some so moving that I had to keep a box of tissues handy as I read—especially that devastating exchange you had with the man who lost his only son in a car crash when that idiot from hell ran a red light. That is dynamite. Heartbreaking. It was the highlight of the evening for me and for a lot of other people. I was there. I heard the sniffles.

Sniffles, yes, all around me, my own included, but here's the thing: I hate to tell you this, but it wasn't always possible to hear the *play*. I don't know if it's the sound editing, the acoustics, the size of the theatre (it's probably too big for such intimate colloquies), our ears or the actors'

microphones. Probably a bit of everything. But when did stage actors start depending on microphones? I mean, exclusively? When I was that long-ago student at the Playhouse they taught us to *project* and use our built-in diaphragms. Why don't so many actors do that any more?

Since I saw the show, I've been trying to understand what it was that I was missing, that was less affecting than just reading the words on the page. I thought perhaps that you might be able to tell me. The acting, including yours, was totally acceptable, given the unusual format of the piece. But then something occurred to me. Perhaps this kind of thoughtful dialogue is too static for the stage. Know what I mean? Theatre is drama—action and conflict—and *Tiny Beautiful Things* is all about words, beautiful words, sometimes thrilling words. You really have to listen, so you also have to hear. And too many of us had trouble hearing. I know it's not just me speaking for myself, because I heard other people talk about it as well on the way out.



Teddy Cañez as the father who lost his son in *Tiny Beautiful Things* at The Pasadena Playhouse.

The drama in *Tiny Beautiful Things* is *spoken about*. It's in the past — except, of course, for the man who lost his only son. For him the drama, alas, will never fade. But there were other little things (not the tiny beautiful ones). For instance, did we really need all the fussing around in that kitchen to go with the words? It seemed to me that it interfered, as if it were there to cover up the fact that there isn't any real dramatic drive in such written exchanges. It's the words that matter, not the unrelated acts of putting a dish in the sink or cutting an apple. I think it was an apple, but it doesn't matter what it was because it had nothing to do with anything. The people asking for advice and the wise answers they received are all that matters. Front and center. Designer Rachel Hauck's kitchen set is a fine model of a well used messy one, but is it really needed?



Nia Vardalos in *Tiny Beautiful Things* at The Pasadena Playhouse.

Just wondering. I know you don't need advice from me. You're the giver of advice. But have you thought of making an audio event out of this play? Podcasting it? Taping it? Of course you have. Such infinite possibilities...

I hope you'll also perform it in more intimate environments, small theatres-in-the-round, small empty spaces, clubs and such. It's highly personal stuff, yet so significant for other people to see and hear, and so important for its letter writers' anonymity to be respected. I totally get that. The format is right. The space it's in deserves to be right as well.

Well, I just did what I said I shouldn't do. I'm bad that way. Let's say I was airing random ideas, definitely not dispensing advice. WTF.

Thank you, Cheryl, for creating the book and thank you, Nia, for assembling that remarkable script.

Ev-haristo, pethimou. (That's Greek for thank you, dear friend; I learned that from my father who was born in Crete. It's all the Greek I know.)

— Mind of a Critic, Heart of a Fan (I stole that, but I don't remember from where)

Top image: l-r, Natalie Woolams-Torres, Nia Vardalos & Giovanni Adams in Tiny Beautiful Things at The Pasadena Playhouse.

Photos by Jenny Graham

WHAT: *Tiny Beautiful Things*

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

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays 2 & 8pm; Sundays 2 & 7pm. Ends May 5. **Please note:** Sameerah Luqmaan-Harris will replace Nia Vardalos in the role of Sugar for the 2pm performances on 4/20, 4/21, 4/27, 4/28 & 5/4. She will also perform on Sunday 5/5 at 2 & 7pm.

HOW: Tickets start at \$25, available online at www.PasadenaPlayhouse.org, by phone at 626.356.7529 or in person at the Pasadena Playhouse Box Office, 39 South El Molino Ave, Pasadena, CA 91101.

PARKING: Underground across the street or in surrounding lots. Free street parking on Sundays.

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