

Cultural Daily

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Two Beauties at A Noise Within

Sylvie · Wednesday, March 22nd, 2017

There are few plays, including the other Shakespearean ones, that pose the challenges of *King Lear*. It's not just the central role that requires monumental stamina and wide-ranging, seasoned talent. Other questions abound. Key among them: did Shakespeare write about a man who was beginning to lose his cognitive faculties with age?

The answer is a loud “yes,” especially in the production currently at A Noise Within (ANW) — a *Lear* set in an indeterminate part of the first half of the 20th century, judging by the wigs (Danielle Griffith) and costumes (Angela Balogh Calin), also judging by the smoking of cigarettes and the omnipresence of certain kinds of firearms, army fatigues, gurneys and other latter-day objects.

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Geoff Elliott as King Lear at A Noise Within.

ANW's founding artistic co-director Julia Rodriguez-Elliott has made many interesting choices in her staging of this tale of power owned, given away and squandered. She has successfully emphasized the universal event of human diminishment that age creates, accompanied, as it so often is, by bad choices. The tragedy's place of honor in the literary canon reflects not just the desperate fall of a powerful monarch, but the universal fall of the *monarch within each of us*, poor souls, as age, declining health and mental capacities combine to propel our inevitable fall from the grace of being both *compos mentis* and alive.

That is the at the heart of this elegant, seamlessly and sensitively trimmed ANW production, carried off with skill, alacrity and a majesty that makes up for the occasional absence of depth in some of the individual performances. Shakespeare bears a share of responsibility for that absence, not always giving many of the peripheral characters their due, and, worse, never explaining the disappearance of Lear's wise, gregarious fool beyond Act Three — a role, while it lasts, played here with gleeful inventiveness by Kasey Mahaffy. (But not to worry: Rodriguez-Elliott has found an ingenious solution to Shakespeare's oversight in the fool's vanishing act and yes, she does explain it.)



Seated, Geoff Elliott as Lear and Kasey Mahaffy as the Fool in *King Lear* at A Noise Within.

She also has, in Trisha Miller's Goneril, one of the most vivid embodiments of the evil in that woman, while in Rafael Goldstein's Edgar, the Duke of Gloucester's slandered, legitimate and "good" son, a deeply felt display of irony and compassion. Lovely performances both, deserving of mention. But it is Geoff Elliott's towering Lear that absorbs, as it should, most if not all of our attention. He is "every inch a king," endowed with the physical stature, the authority, the vigor and the booming, resonating voice that reaches to the far corners of the hall. Who could resist, let alone confront, an individual of such commanding presence?

That immense power and arrogance serve him extremely well in the play's early scenes. Yet despite Rodriguez-Elliott's thoughtful inclusion of a growing dishevelment in the dress of this monarch as his discontent and disorientation grow, that physicality works less well in the later difficult scenes, when Lear becomes so pitifully diminished by a failing mind and a shrinking personality. One may argue that the flashes of strength or lucidity he still manages to project are attributable to a great man's unwillingness to surrender to the body's limitations and to the mind's increasing failures. It is an acceptable, even logical interpretation, but it takes something away from some of the keener sorrow of Lear's anguished final moments, when he is robbed of everything, especially of the most precious of all of his possessions: the daughter whom he favored beyond all else, Cordelia (a muted Erika Soto).



Geoff Elliott as Lear and Erika Soto as Cordelia in *King Lear* at A Noise Within.

Still, this remains a highly distinguished and memorable production of the Mount Everest of plays to add to ANW's exceptional and enviable record of 25 continuous years of producing the world's classics.

Nor have all of them have been the great tragedies either. In fact ANW has had more triumphs with its comedies, such as, most recently, Feydeau's *A Flea In Her Ear*, Shaw's *You Never Can Tell*, Beaumarchais' *The Marriage of Figaro* and Molière's *The Imaginary Invalid*. In addition, its enduring success is enhanced by its equally enduring habit of presenting these productions in rotating repertory. For me, watching *Lear* was followed the very next day by sitting through the delights of Steven Robman's staging of Eugene O'Neill's seldom seen and only comedy, *Ah, Wilderness!* The proximity was a spectacular juxtaposition of two entirely opposite yet strong examples of this company's work. (As if this weren't achievement enough, the musical *Man of La Mancha* is up next in this season of infinite variety.)



Emily Goss as Muriel and Matt Gall as Richard in *Ah, Wilderness!* at A Noise Within.

Ah, Wilderness! set in 1906 and written in 1933, preceded Thornton Wilder's *Our Town* by five years, and yet the two plays have much in common. Both speak of the same halcyon time of life in small-town America during the first decade of the 20th century, before the two world wars and the invention of the atom bomb poisoned the atmosphere forever. And while *Our Town* has a more searching philosophical quest and cannot be called a comedy overall, the plays are linked by similarities in their tender depiction of an innocent America that we no longer recognize, yet deeply yearn to rediscover and wish we could inhabit again, if only in our dreams.

Ah Wilderness! was totally out of character for O'Neill, of course, whose much darker other plays, and whose own dystopian family and family life were nothing like the one of the Miller family in

his *Ah, Wilderness!*

In the latter we find a group of small-town denizens leading a contended, not to say complacent family existence, centered around the simple joys and problems of growing children, food, music and singing around the upright parlor piano on a pleasant Fourth of July.** Their biggest worries are the minor ones of Uncle Sid's drinking (played with a rich gamut of emotion by Alan Blumenfeld), spinster Lily Miller (Kitty Swink), who loves Sid but rejects his proposals of marriage in fear of his alcoholism and living her lonely little life with her brother's family — the newspaper publisher Nat Miller (Nicholas Hormann), Nat's wife Essie (the ever splendid Deborah Strang) and their children — along, of course, with the obligatory kooky Irish maid (Kelsey Carthew, who amplifies and enriches a small role with her unique brand of zaniness).



Deborah Strang and Matt Gall in *Ah, Wilderness!* at A Noise Within.

As for plot, it is mostly the story of son Richard Miller (a delightful Matt Gall), would-be writer and rebel whose coming of age is in full bloom in the most predictable, amusing and harmless way. This family's mild trials and tribulations seem infinitesimal by some of today's grueling standards. We embrace them gladly, as we relish reliving those jollier days at the heart of a mostly happy family for two and a half blissfully escapist hours.



l-r: Nicholas Hormann, Deborah Strang, Kitty Swink and Alan Blumenfeld in *Ah, Wilderness!* at A Noise Within.

***All the songs used in this production were plucked from The Eugene O'Neill Songbook, published on eOneill.com with the generous permission of Jonathan Elkus of East Bay Books. The Songbook, complete with sheet music, includes more than 70 songs and/or musical selections and can be purchased from [Subito Music](http://SubitoMusic.com).*

*Top image: The cast of *Ah, Wilderness!* at A Noise Within as it clusters around the piano on the Fourth of July for some family singing and bonding.*

Photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: *King Lear & Ah, Wilderness!*

WHERE: 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena, CA 91107

WHEN: In rotating repertory. Info at www.anoisewithin.org or at 626.356.3100 x 1.

HOW: Tickets start at \$25, available at www.anoisewithin.org or 626.356.3100 x 1 or in person at the theatre box office.

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THE CRUISE AT LATINO THEATRE COMPANY



l-r: Gary Lamb, Carolyn Almos, Ric Salinas, Brian Wallace and Kenneth Lopez in *The Cruise* at the Latino Theatre Company. Photo by Grettel Cortes Photography.

The Cruise, a comedy by Jonathan Cenicerioz, follows the misadventures of a con artist named Ramon Garcia (Ric Salinas) who, banished for misrepresenting himself as an “enrichment lecturer” on this particular line has sneaked on board its Majestic, an upscale vessel cruising in the Caribbean, by changing his name if not his false credentials. What’s more, he’s brought along his son James (Kenneth Lopez), a nice young New Yorker and struggling writer with whom Ramon wants to cultivate a better relationship. The diffident James is aware of his Dad’s crooked ways. Alas, Ramon is recognized by cruise director, Boyd (Brian Wallace), a nemesis, who tells him he wants them both off the boat at the very next port of call.

This is not *Catch Me If You Can*. The comedy here is hard to find. Ramon and James become friendly with another couple, the pleasantly easygoing Howard (Gary Lamb) and his newly wealthy wife Judith (Carolyn Almos) who’s using a recent inheritance from her father to start a political action committee. After a few fairly flat shenanigans, Ramon, as promised, is walked off the ship by Boyd, while son James gets offered a steady job writing for Judith’s PAC. End of play.

There is very little to shout about here. This is a weak comedy, slackly directed by Heath Cullens. Salinas’ major comic talents are wasted and he seems uneasy in the part. Wallace as the nasty Boyd speaks with an accent that aims for German, but gets hung up at Weird. Almos, Lopez and Lamb give decent journeyman performances, but the writing doesn’t support them. Or anything else.

Some cruises are simply better than others.

WHAT: *The Cruise*

WHERE: Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 So. Spring St., Los Angeles, CA 90013.

WHEN: Thursdays-Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 3pm; Monday, April 3 only, 7:30pm. Through April 9.

HOW: Tickets \$22-\$38, available at 866.811.4111 or at <http://thelatc.org/>. Group sales: 213.489.0994.

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