Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Two Plays

Sylvie · Thursday, October 18th, 2018

Currently on Southern California stages, two plays offer intriguing if imperfect takes on very different issues, one ancient and one modern. Branden Jacobs-Jenkins' *Gloria* in Atwater Village tackles the degradation of today's American workplace, while in Pasadena, Sarah B. Mantell's *Everything That Never Happened* spins an overlay on Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* that creates as many problems as it solves.

Having only seen two of Jacobs-Jenkins' plays — *Neighbors* and *Appropriate* — both of which I had some problems with, I don't consider myself a fan so much as a person willing to be persuaded. So why should I be surprised that the Echo Theatre's production of *Gloria* still finds me conflicted?

Let me amend that. The man can write. The man also can overwrite. But few other playwrights have the talent to so skillfully annoy and astonish an audience at the same time, while elbowing a crooked path to shiny little kernels of alarming truths.

So somewhere in that muddle of jargon and torrent of words that is *Gloria* — many as exasperating as they are hilarious — the play delivers a jaundiced portrait of American life, in this case seen through the prism of the current corporate workplace.

Gloria's wickedly comic first act is based on the competitiveness in the midtown New York offices of a national magazine. Jacobs-Jenkins, who worked briefly as an editorial assistant at *The New Yorker*, has a spot-on gift for skewering the triviality and cruelty of the chatter among the young-ish people who populate these cubicles.

They reveal themselves as messed-up minor egomaniacs who toil in a snake pit, hate their jobs, drink too much, accomplish too little and envy the invisible woman in the office behind the frosted glass whose job they'd all like to have.

l-r, Alana Dietze, Seven Strobel and Michael Sturgis in *Gloria* at the Echo Theatre. Photo by Darrett Sanders.

Ani (Alana Dietze) is the more or less normal one in the room, as is the African American intern Miles (Devere Rogers) who's trying to figure out what he wants to be when he grows up, other than rich and famous. All is tranquil until the hyper and hungover associate editor Dean (Michael Sturgis) arrives late and disheveled, followed even later by the more hyper Kendra (the

unstoppable Jenny Soo), an Asian American fashion-plate whose only “work” seems to be spewing a nonstop stream of aspersions on everything and everyone around her. Her quasi-soliloquies designed to amaze, amuse and exhaust succeed on all counts, especially the third. The resulting noise is driving Lorin, a factchecker down the hall (the overwrought Steve Strobel), into terminal neurosis.

The main subject of the specious conversation is a party given the night before by Gloria, a mousey loner who works in copy (where you presumably go to die). Everyone was invited but, in a devastating show of desertion, only Dean showed up. We see the glum Gloria twice, when she stops by in search of an unspoken something and retreats as weirdly as she arrived. All the rowdiness comes to a sudden stop when a stunning event that cannot be revealed radically interrupts everything.

Eight months later, at Kendra’s favorite Starbucks, a series of telling encounters force us to sort out the fallout of that shattering moment. What was funny eight months earlier now shows underlying cracks that are a lot more complex. Drip by drip, the comedy, gives way to darker satire and a cautionary tale. The laughs are gone, but Jacobs-Jenkins’ targets remain squarely in his sights.

Chris Fields sobering direction and a skilled cast deliver the goods. Sturgis and Soo stand out in the most colorful and complicated roles that also undergo the greatest transformations. But the play’s the thing.

Jacobs-Jenkins’ writing is not for all markets. Some may find it grating or too raw. As with Martin McDonagh’s and David Mamet’s work, it reflects the unvarnished coarsening of our world. It’s not a pretty sight, but it is breathtakingly true.

Leo Marks & Erika Soto in *Everything That Never Happened* at Boston Court. Photo by Jenny Graham.

IN Pasadena meanwhile, something entirely different occupies the stage at the Theatre @ Boston Court. Mantell’s *Everything That Never Happened* is advertised as a take on characters from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice.* While it uses four of the *Merchant*’s characters — Jessica (a strong Erika Soto), her father Shylock (Leo Marks), her suitor Lorenzo (Paul Culos) and her father’s servant, Gobbo (Dudley Saunders) — Mantell’s play is more a usurpation than a take.

In Shakespeare’s *Merchant,* Jessica shockingly steals from her father and elopes with Lorenzo, no questions asked or answered. In Mantell’s version the action is even murkier. She focuses on whether and why the Jewish Jessica would marry Lorenzo, the Christian man she loves and who purportedly loves her back. But while Jessica yearns to break free of the ghetto and the strictures imposed by her father and her faith, there’s a wrinkle. It seems Lorenzo owes her father money. That leaves room for doubt about his motives, Jessica’s desires and the anti-Semitic tinge that infects the situation. As if that weren’t enough, Mantell also injects a feminist twist into Jessica’s simpler desire to break free.

Paul Culos & Erika Soto in *Everything That Never Happened* at Boston court. Photo by Jenny Graham.

The script is spare and written more as an affirming Jewish parable than a theatrical narrative. But

Jessica's devotion to Lorenzo is no more resolved here than it was by Shakespeare. The intrusion of an unrequited love on Gobbo's part is unpersuasive and Shylock's conversion looks more like an intentional cold shower than a baptism.

Complicating things are the play's half-sentences and poetic aspirations that co-opt a modern ideology, jumping about in time, including the future, by invoking pogroms and other crimes against the Jews. Intended as a mutual absolution for each other, a *Kaddish*, sung in Hebrew by Jessica and Shylock, aims at an exalted expiation of sorts that it does not achieve.

Anything is acceptable in the theatre if it works. In this case, even as skilled a director as Jessica Kubzanzky cannot overcome the writing's self-indulgence and the result is something of a well-intended muddle.

Shakespeare wrote a flawed play with situations that he famously failed to clarify. Mantell has done much the same, substituting her own concerns and version of events with just as little clarity.

Top image: Jenny Soo and Michael Sturgis in Gloria *at the Echo Theatre. Photo by Darrett Sanders.*

WHAT: ***Gloria***

WHERE: Echo Theatre, Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Ave
Los Angeles, CA 90039.

WHEN: Fridays, Saturdays, Mondays 8pm; Sundays 2pm. Ends Oct. 28.

HOW: Tickets, $20-$34, available at www.EchoTheaterCompany.com or 310-307-3753.

WHAT: ***Everything That Never Happened***

WHERE: The Theatre @ Boston Court, 70 No. Mentor Ave., Pasadena CA 91106.

WHEN: Thursdays-Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 2pm. Through Nov. 4.

HOW: Tickets $20-$39, available at www.BostonCourtPasadena.org or 626.683.6801.

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