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# Whirligig and Wall: Too Much Rehashing

David Sheward · Wednesday, May 31st, 2017

Hamish Linklater is one of our most versatile actors, enlivening both sitcoms and Shakespeare. He's one of the few who has not abandoned the latter for the former, appearing regularly on New York stages after finding success on the small screen. His new play *The Whirligig*, now at the Pershing Signature Center in a production from The New Group, displays a performer's instinct for juicy, conflict-stuffed scenes. There are flaws in construction, but overall, it's a worthy effort.

This is one of those plays that opens with a group of seemingly unrelated characters drawn together by a central crisis. Gradually, we find out they have been interconnected for years and their apparently random, innocent-at-the-time actions have led to the defining crisis. The seams are showing and Linklater is guilty of oversimplification; in his world a single day or event can lead to a tragic outcome. That seldom happens in reality, but he makes up for this error with engaging dialogue and heartbreaking pathos.

Zosia Mamet and Dolly Wells in *The Whirligig.*
Credit: Monique Carboni

The focus of this whirligig of dysfunction is the fatally ill, twentysomething Julie, who has returned to her home in the small Massachusetts town of Pittsfield after years of substance abuse. Her parents, former best friend, drug dealer-boyfriend, high-school English teacher, and assorted others gather around her deathbed, wrangling over their guilt and dealing with blighted relationships. The first act spends too much time going over the past while the superior second act shows us these conflicts in flashback rather than telling us about them.

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Director Scott Elliott and a solid cast valiantly attempt to keep the rehashing as vital as the flashback scenes where the seeds of Julie's addiction are planted. Julie is actually the least interesting character since Linklater gives her minimum stage time, everyone else seems to have more fascinating problems. In fact, the high point of the entire play is a funny, off-kilter exchange between Kristina (a stingingly caustic Dolly Wells), Julie's frustrated mom, and Trish (a quirky Zosia Mamet), the girl's stoned best friend. Grace Van Patten fills in the missing spaces in Julie's psyche and Norbert Leo Butz infuses Michael, her alcoholic actor father, with the appropriate rage, narcissism, and regret. Noah Bean as Trish's put-upon husband and Alex Hurt and Jonny Orsini as a pair of conflicted brothers create in-depth portraits while veteran Jon DeVries makes the most of

the peripheral Mr. Cormeny, who mostly sits on a barstool and drinks.

James Badge Dale and Tamara Tunie in *Building the Wall*.
Credit: Carol Rosegg

Robert Schenkkan is also guilty of rehashing in his new play *Building the Wall*. Written in a rush of anger after the Presidential election, this two hander imagines a dystopian future as a result of Trump's anti-immigration policies. In a 2019 maximum security prison, African-American historian Gloria questions white detention-center runner Rick on his role in a massive racist crime. Ari Edelson gives the work a taut edge. James Badge Dale makes Rick a believable three-dimensional being in over his head rather than a monster bigot and while Gloria is mostly a sounding board for Rick, Tamara Tunie imbues her with individual details. But neither character changes or learns anything new. Much of their dialogue consists of previous actions, statistics, headlines, and talking points. You can almost hear Schenkkan saying to himself, "Better put in some personal stuff, so they don't sound too much like talking heads." Yet despite the shortcomings, our interest is held for its 80 minutes.

The playwright has previously created affecting work on American history such as the Pulitzer Prize winning *Kentucky Cycle* (a fictional saga spanning two centuries) and the Tony-winning *All the Way* (a fact-based account of the early LBJ presidency), but here he has allowed his passion to overrule his dramaturgy and we get the theatrical equivalent of a hastily-drawn political cartoon.

*The Whirligig*: May 21—June 18. The New Group at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2pm & 7:30pm, Thu-Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun, 2pm. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission. $75-$120. (212) 279-4200. www.thenewgroup.org.

*Building the Wall*: May 24—July 9. New World Stages, 340 W. 59th St., NYC. Wed-Fri 8pm, Sat 2:30pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm & 7pm, Mon 8pm. Running time: one hour and 20 mins. with no intermission. $35. (212) 239-6200. www.telecharge.com.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY and Theaterlife.

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