

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Edward Albee's *At Home At the Zoo*—And More

Sylvie · Wednesday, March 15th, 2017

The eminent Deaf West Theatre has returned to The Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts, the scene of its previous triumph with its exceptional version of *Spring Awakening*. This time Deaf West has brought a chamber piece that is playing in the Wallis' Lovelace Studio, a smaller space that is more appropriate for the current bill of back-to-back two-handers, which, in the case of Deaf West, is really four-handers.

Edward Albee's At Home At the Zoo is the compression of two short Albee plays. The first one, *Homelife*, is an afterthought as well as a prequel to Albee's galvanizing — and much older — *The Zoo Story*, the 1958 play that put Albee on the map. Albee was commissioned to create *Homelife* some four decades later by Hartford Stage for the purpose of enlarging our knowledge of Peter, the somewhat faceless and complacent text-book publisher who shares the stage with the seriously adrift Jerry of *The Zoo Story*.

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Troy Kotsur as Peter in *Edward Albee's At Home At the Zoo*.

Originally known as *Peter and Jerry*, the double bill opened off-Broadway in 2007 and was later retitled for a Philadelphia production as *Edward Albee's At Home At the Zoo*. In whatever incarnation, it is slender fare, with the classic and classically menacing *Zoo Story* in no need of rescuing — especially not by something as derivative as *Homelife*, an edgy familial discussion between a husband Peter (Troy Kotsur) and his wife Ann (Amber Zion) which has its roots most firmly planted in the kind of mildly mysterious exchanges that Eugene Ionesco might have invented.



Amber Zion as Ann in *Edward Albee's At Home At the Zoo*.

Homelife takes a while to build and serves chiefly to illuminate the boredom that a comfortable middle class existence can give rise to. Playing boredom has its dangers, taking its time getting where it wants to go, time that is not especially compelling. *Zoo Story*, of course, *is* compelling, not to say explosive, with a tempestuous performance by Russell Harvard as Jerry that equates a rant that peaks too early and has nowhere left to go. (Tyrone Giordano takes over the role today in the production's singular bit of double-casting).

But this is Deaf West, remember?

The most impressive aspect of the production is the co-ordination between the speaking and nonspeaking actors. Jake Eberle “speaks” the mild publisher Peter in both plays; Paige Lindsey-White “speaks” Ann in *Homelife*. They stand to the side, at a slight remove, behind a row of what look like piano strings, watching the action unspool on stage in both body language and American Sign Language.

For *Zoo Story*, we’re in Central Park. Jerry has ambled over from his middle class apartment on West 74th, to take in the autumnal air and indulge in a little *al fresco* reading, until he is interrupted by the itinerant Jerry. This time the speaking actors are allowed on stage, lazing around on a second bench not far from the one on which Peter sits.

The same drill applies when it comes to matching words to the action, but, in a real *tour de force*, Jeff Alan-Lee verbally takes on Jerry’s lengthy and increasingly agitated peroration. All of these are no minor synchronizing feats and director Coy Middlebrook has controlled this unlikely marriage of hand and mouth flawlessly, having previously served as associate director for Deaf West’s *Big River* in 2004.



Russell Harvard as Jerry and Troy Kotsur as Petter in the background in *Edward Albee’s At Home At the Zoo*.

Julian V. Elstob created the lighting, while the scenic and costume design are both by Karyl Newman — basic for *Homelife* and, for *Zoo Story*, consisting mostly of two benches, autumn leaves on the ground and photographic projections on panels that reveal a park. Tom Jones’ sound design also is satisfactory, considering the intimacy of the space and the need to integrate the voices seamlessly to the events on stage so they sound as if they emerge from one body.

One might wish for a little more from *Homelife* and for a little less from *Zoo Story*. But this presentation is as much an exercise in this kind of joint performance as it is anything else and, as such, it remains an admirable achievement.

Top image: l-r: Troy Kotsur as Peter and Russell Harvard as Jerry in Edward Albee’s At Home at the Zoo at the Wallis Annenberg Center for the Performing Arts.

Photos by Kevin Parry.

WHAT: *Edward Albee’s At Home At the Zoo*

WHERE: The Wallis, Lovelace Studio Theater, 9590 N. Santa Monica Blvd., Beverly Hills CA 90210.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2 & 8pm; Sundays, 2 & 7pm. Ends March 26.

HOW: Tickets \$40-\$75 (subject to change), available online at TheWallis.org, by phone at 310.746.4000 or in person at the theatre’s box-office at 9390 N. Santa Monica Blvd., Beverly Hills, CA 90210.



Cast of *Good Grief* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

GOOD GRIEF, WHAT WAS THAT?

Ngozi Anyanwu is an American-Nigerian woman on the march. Read her program bio and you'll see that nothing stops her. She's a talent — a poet as well as a playwright and performer. And her play *Good Grief*, now at the Kirk Douglas, in which she also plays the central role, has received some solid awards in earlier iterations.

I tell you this because I do not wish to detract from Anyanwu's noted achievements, including her forceful performance in *Good Grief*, a coming of age story about an energetic young woman named N or Nkechi (a thinly disguised guess-who). Just like the playwright, N is a complicated American girl who grew up in a Nigerian household in Bucks County, PA, and we get to meet her at a time when she's dealing with the far end of her puberty and a serious blow in the accidental car-crash death of a boyfriend. N does it as she does everything: with grand fuss, turbulence and turmoil — lots and lots of drama cloaked in wildly imaginative forays into varied recollections and introductions to if not sex, then the very idea of sex.



Ngozi Anyanwu and Wade Allain-Marcus in *Good Grief* at the Kirk Douglas.

That is it for *Good Grief*. The play is not a play as much as it is a series of lengthy philosophical encounters with Papa (Dayo Ade), with Bro (Marcus Henderson), with her mother Nene (Omozé Idehenre), and two particular guys named JD (Mark Jude Sullivan) and the recently deceased MJG (Wade Allain-Marcus). These encounters play around with time (time that also can be rewound as in a tape recorder), but they lead to exchanges that often sag in the middle because they are basically all talk and only talk, mostly from N. The action is accompanied by some rather gorgeous intervening astral and mythological characters, richly costumed by designer Karen Perry, and followed by an epiphanous ending.

Director Patricia McGregor has seen to it that the actors fly through the script (no intermission), with plenty of assist coming chiefly from the ever-dynamic Anyanwu who has another thing going for her: humor. This combination normally would result in a wildly original idea, but the liveliness of the pace and the relentless verbosity do not serve the production well and point up the natural stasis of the situation. Teenage girls, even the ones that are really women by this point, tend to be in both crisis and stasis at once at that juncture of their lives. Accidental death only magnifies every aspect of the situation.



Dayo Ade and Omozé Idehenre in *Good Grief* at the Kirk Douglas.

The scenic design by Stephanie Kerley Schwartz consists of movable transparent one-room houses, outlined by strips of neon light, pointing up the intimacy of the friendships and the neighborhood. Pablo Santiago's inventive lighting highlights the mythological/astral figures and, above all, the infinity of the starry night-time skies. As the script says, it is always night.

Having read the play (a privilege an audience does not always have), I also can tell you that Anyanwu is a fascinating distorter of not only time, but of words and syntax, and that the extravagant things she does with them are more worthy of the poet than the playwright. She

uniquely alters English in ways that refresh and enlarge it, much as black American enriches and enlivens the more traditional uses of the language. Anyanwu's mind plunges forward (or backward), and when it comes to engaging with language, she does it entirely on her own terms.



Wade Allain-Marcus (on the floor) and Ngozi Anyanwu in *Good Grief* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

Her linguistic inventions claim our attention, but they're too easily and too often lost on stage in this production. The restlessness of the delivery and frequent lack of adequate projection at the Kirk Douglas, where sound designer Adam Phalen seems to have left a few dead spots lying around, make it difficult to follow the action. So while the poet cannot be dismissed, the playwright may need to do some rethinking. As of now, *Good Grief* is too long, too verbal, too confusing and comes across in too many places as self-indulgent — something I'm quite sure it was never intended to be.



Wade Allain-Marcus and Ngozi Anyanwu in *Good Grief* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

Photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: *Good Grief*

WHERE: Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd., Culver City, CA 90232

WHEN: Tuesday-Friday, 8pm; Saturday, 2 & 8pm; Sunday, 1 & 6:30pm. No Monday performances. Through March 26. Exception: no public performance on March 14.

HOW: Tickets: \$25–\$70 (subject to change), available online at CenterTheatreGroup.org, by phone at 213.628.2772 or in person at Center Theatre Group box office (at the Ahmanson Theatre) or at the Kirk Douglas Theatre box office two hours prior to performances. Groups: 213.972.7231. Deaf community: Information @ CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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