

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Jake Gyllenhaal and Ruth Wilson Light Up Constellations

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 21st, 2015

The concept of multiple universes with infinite possibilities has been used as fodder for many sci-fi movies and TV shows (Who can forget that *Star Trek* episode with the evil Capt. Kirk and Spock?). There have also been a few plays tackling the subject. Usually you have a couple playing out variations on the stages of their relationship. This type of playful playwriting can be fun for a brief comedy sketch (David Ives and Caryl Churchill have done effective short pieces on this theme), but any longer than 10 minutes and the gimmick wears thin.

So it's no wonder that Nick Payne's *Constellations*, a joint production from the Royal Court Theatre and Manhattan Theatre Club, feels a bit drawn out even at 70 minutes, possibly the shortest running time for a Broadway show since David Mamet's *The Anarchist*. On set designer Tom Scutt's bare, balloon-decorated stage, Jake Gyllenhaal and Ruth Wilson (from the London production), enact dozens of varying vignettes from the on-again, off-again romance between Roland, a beekeeper and Marianne, a scientist. I suspect Payne gave her that occupation solely so she could introduce the idea of flowing timespans with alternative versions of reality.



Jake Gyllenhaal and Ruth Wilson in Nick Paynes *Constellations*

The duo meet cute at a barbecue, move in together, break up, reconcile, and face mortality as Marianne contemplates assisted suicide when she develops a brain tumor—or not. Each possibility is followed by an opposite outcome. Like the time-travelling Doctor Who, Payne skips back and forth between possible scenarios. In one, Marianne cheats on Roland, in another it's the other way around. A later segment has Marianne eagerly accepting Roland's awkward proposal, followed up by her rejecting him. You get the general idea. The short scenes are broken up by flashes of Lee Curran's lighting or the balloons falling which may represent shifting molecules or just balloons. Payne does deliver clever dialogue and director Michael Longhurst and his two-person cast give the rapid sequences variety and punch.

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Film star Gyllenhaal turns in a fun, charismatic performance, but Wilson (fresh off her Golden Globe win for Showtime's *The Affair*) provides the electric current that keeps this toy-like play running. Through all the different storylines, her Marianne fizzles like a glass of soda about to flow over. Her fumbling attempts at breaking the ice with Roland are particularly hilarious and the desperate anger she displays when the tumor cripples her ability to express herself is devastating.

Unfortunately, the play comes across as more of an acting exercise than a fully-realized work. Gyllenhaal and Wilson's ability to create markedly distinct emotions and intentions with almost exactly the same words is admirable, but it's not quite enough to make up for the thin material. Plus asking Broadway prices for such a short, slight piece is pretty cheeky. An additional one-act curtain-raiser would have been most welcome.

Jan. 13—March 15. Manhattan Theatre Club and the Royal Court Theatre at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, 261 W. 47th St., NYC. Tue., Wed., 7 p.m.; Thu.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: 70 minutes with no intermission; \$67-\$140. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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