

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Less-than Evening with The Humans

Sylvie · Wednesday, June 27th, 2018

Sooner or later it was bound to happen. A play showered with glory, here and elsewhere, including Broadway (where it won a Tony and a New York Drama Critics Circle award for Best Play, glowing reviews and more, plus becoming a finalist for the Pulitzer) slipped into my orbit and did ... next to nothing for me.

As unpopular as this reaction may be, I own my response. This play's title is *The Humans*, it's at The Ahmanson, performed by its award-winning New York cast and staged by its talented New York director, Joe Mantello. I appreciate the good, if not exceptional, acting that comes with it because actors almost always deliver 110%, and when they don't, it's almost always not for lack of trying.

Stephen Karam's play about the middle class Blake family's Thanksgiving dinner, that takes place in a year that has not been great for pretty much any of them, is wholly traditional in form and substance. And it pleads its case.

The plea occurs in the cramped apartment that younger daughter Brigid (Sarah Steele) and her boyfriend Richard (Nick Mills) have just moved into (an accurately stifling scenic design by David Zinn). Brigid and Richard are delighted with their "find" because, hey, it is a split-level and, above all, it is *bigger* than whatever sardine can they had been living in before this.

So what if the bathroom has no windows and the layout is strange, and it is subjected to weird, unexplained very loud thumps from the apartment above? This is New York!

Completing the evening's dinner guest list are Brigid's gay sister Aimee (Cassie Beck), recently separated from her partner and feeling the pain (among many other pains); Brigid's stereotypical Scranton, PA parents Deirdre (Jayne Houdyshell) and Erik (Reed Birney), and Erik's mother Fiona, known as Momo, who is mostly unresponsive in the grip of serious dementia (Lauren Klein, in what may be the most difficult and best performance of them all).

The moving van hasn't yet arrived with most of Brigid and Richard's stuff, but this valiant little group is determined to make this Thanksgiving a happy occasion, even if what furniture they have scraped together is barebones, the plates, cups and tableware plastic, and the family relationships frayed if not fractured...



Reed Birney & Jayne Houdyshell in *The Humans* at The Ahmanson Theatre. Photo by Joan Marcus.

What's more, the members of this family often succeed. They do care about one another, but individually, they have issues. Big ones. Some with themselves, some with others, some with each other, and deeper ones that consist of the yawning gaps between their lifelong aspirations and their current reality, which lies somewhere between disappointing and dismal. These revelations are separated by the usual consoling *clichés* that no one takes seriously or believes.

Having fun yet? The play has been widely lauded as being a snapshot of our fading and failing middle class. And that is precisely the problem: not that this ugly and distressing fact is the *crux* of the play, but that Karam doesn't take us anywhere interesting, serious or revealing with it. If that sounds fine to you, then welcome to the Blake family forum.

Theirs is a collective litany of misadventures — bad luck, bad health, poor decisions and bad mistakes, some avoidable, some not. Along the way we're offered glimpses of family misfires and resentments — one dig or bitter spoonful at a time, delivered like tiny doses of nasty medicine. They tend to pile up. These people are trying to get through their days with scraps of dignity and apologies for their failures, surrounded by, if not drowning in, the deadening bromides of encouragement that they offer each other.

A final confession by dad Erik, more shocking than any of the ones that have gone before, is intended to be climactic. But it really isn't. It comes late and it's not much of a payoff because so many other shreds of disagreeable news have preceded it that we mostly experience — at least I did — a kind of surfeit effect.

This intermissionless play, Karam tells us in a program interview, is designed to take us to “the epic via the intimate,” but it feels more as if it's deeply stuck in the mundane. A snapshot without a caption. And that can be as stifling as the cramped apartment, as windowless as that bathroom, as inescapable as a diurnal dead end.



l-r, Sarah Steele & Cassie Beck in *The Humans* at The Ahmanson Theatre. Photo by Brigitte Lacombe.

There is the temptation to consider this result as some sort of brilliant insight into the difficulties of middle class life today. Or we can chalk it all up to changing tastes or changing times. But these are lazy answers.

To engage our attention, theatre needs to be more rigorous than that, whether it wants to make us laugh, think or cry. Or it did, the last time I looked. Instead, *The Humans* presents an audience with a whirlwind of mostly unhappy every day facts that do not often connect, even as these characters try hard to make them do so by papering them over with a kind of forced *bonhomie*.

It is playwriting that has done half the work. Many things are left dangling, presumably on purpose. We never find out what is causing the heavy thumping upstairs or whom the shadow presence perceived in the indoor courtyard might be, or if we should worry about it, or why any of it should matter to this play.

Do we simply call it a study of 21st century alienation and settle for that? Many audiences will, but that's not good enough. We don't need pat or even specific answers. What we need is depth and *provocation*. And there isn't much of either to be found.

Top image: l-r, Reed Birney, Cassie Beck, Jayne Houdyshell, Lauren Klein, Sarah Steele & Nick Mills in The Humans at The Ahmanson Theatre. Photo by Lawrence K. Ho.

WHAT: *The Humans*

WHERE: Center Theatre Group/Ahmanson Theatre, Music Center, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Exceptions: NO performance July 4. ADDED: 2 p.m. performance July 5. Ends July 29.

HOW: Tickets: \$30 – \$130 (subject to change), available online at 213.972.4400, or at CenterTheatreGroup.org or in person at the Center Theatre Group Box Office. Groups: 213.972.7231. Deaf community: visit CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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