

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Misery with Bruce Willis, Allegiance with George Takei Fail to Thrill

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 18th, 2015

Two new Broadway shows (*Misery*, *Allegiance*) dish up familiar thrills and emotions while two Off-Broadway shows at the Public Theater (*First Daughter Suite*, *Before Your Very Eyes*) dare to be different. Even though the Off-Broadway ventures don't entirely succeed, at least they provide fresh perspectives and innovative staging.

Stephen King's 1987 blockbuster novel *Misery* takes the unusual step—for a nonmusical—of coming to the stage after the movie has already been filmed. You'll recall the 1990 thriller, tautly directed by Rob Reiner, told the neatly constructed tale of best-selling romance novelist Paul Sheldon being held hostage by devoted fan Annie Wilkes in her snowbound Colorado cabin after he breaks both legs in an auto accident. Annie just happens to be a trained nurse and obsessed with *Misery*, the heroine of Paul's series of books. But she goes ballistic on her patient when she discovers he has killed off her idol in the latest edition.



Bruce Willis in *Misery*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Kathy Bates dominated the film and won an Oscar for her terrifying performance as the deranged captor while James Caan had to settle for second-fiddle status as Paul. Similarly Laurie Metcalf holds center stage in a creepier limning than Bates' while Bruce Willis rarely rouses himself above a stupor. Granted he is confined to bed and reacting to Metcalf for the majority of the 90-minute intermission suspenser, but he only occasionally connects with the character's desperate plight.

Metcalf on the other hand delves deeply into Annie's complex motivations, slowly revealing her twisted psyche. At first she's convincing as the admiring angel of mercy, girlishly excited that her favorite author is in her home. Then as her cherished romantic illusions are challenged, Metcalf gradually peels back the folksy veneer to expose the desperately lonely monster willing to maim and murder to maintain them.

Scriptwriter William Goldman delivers an pared-down version of his own 1990 screenplay, maintaining the basic plot but forgoing the character-defining details. Paul Frears hands in a routine staging. With Willis failing to deliver much subtext, the chills are mainly supplied by David Korins' ingenious revolving set and Michael Friedman's Hitchcockian music. The movie's most infamous scene where Annie smashes Paul's ankles with a sledgehammer is recreated with agonizing detail thanks to the special effects of Gregory Meeh. Metcalf delivers the blows and the

audiences screams, but then laughs at her next line: “Oh my God, I love you!” The scene encapsulates the difference between the screen and stage version. The former was truly terrifying, but the latter is just campy.



Lea Salonga and George Takei in *Allegiance*.

Credit: Matthew Murphy

While *Misery* is a retread of a successful property, *Allegiance* takes on an unexpected subject for a musical, attempting some out-of-the-Broadway-box storytelling but finally succumbing to convention. The tuner’s inspiration comes from the childhood experiences of *Star Trek* icon George Takei who was interred along with his family during World War II when thousands of Japanese-Americans were treated as enemy aliens merely because of their race. The melodramatic book—a collaborative effort by Marc Acito, Lorenzo Thione and Jay Kuo who also wrote the music and lyrics—follows the Kimura family’s travails as they are forced to abandon their California farm and move to a relocation camp. This seldom-explored dark side of American history is a worthy topic, but *Allegiance* employs it for soap operatics with a corny flashback framing device featuring Takei as Sam, the now-elderly Kimura son receiving a secret envelope from a mysterious stranger.

Despite the hokey plot twists, *Allegiance* does contain moving moments and original material. Kuo uses period musical idioms like boogie-woogie and swing to interesting effect in clever pastiches, but too often veers into generic *Les Miz* territory such as the obligatory power ballad for Lea Salonga as Kei, Sam’s determined sister. Stafford Arima’s staging is swift and proficient with Donyale Werle’s sliding-screen sets and Darrel Maloney’s expressive projections aiding immensely. The cast works hard with Salonga cementing her position as one of Broadway’s most powerful musical stars. Takei doubles as the older Sam and his own grandfather with compassion. Telly Leung is saddled with a one-dimensional hero role as the younger Sam, but delivers a sturdy performance. Michael K. Lee and Katie Rose Clarke provide welcome comic spark in supporting roles.



Betsy Morgan, Barbara Walsh, and Caissie Levy in *First Daughter Suite*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

Allegiance is at its most captivating when it departs from the expected Broadway template. Michael John LaChiusa’s *First Daughter Suite* at the Public doesn’t follow any of the standard rules. This quartet of mini-musicals employs unexpected music, clever lyrics, and imaginative premises. Like his 1993 *First Lady Suite*, the work explores the women—mothers and wives as well as daughter—near the President and how they react to national crises. LaChiusa’s score is refreshingly intricate and complex throughout, but the storylines for two of the pieces are relatively static. The vignettes centered on the Reagans and the Bushes are more ruminative than plot-driven. A dream sequence featuring the Ford and Carter women goes on a bit too long. Only the opening Nixon sequence, set during a White House wedding, is entirely successful. Barbara Walsh’s repressed Pat Nixon and Rachel Bay Jones’ sweet but steely Rosalyn Carter and Laura Bush stand out in an estimable all-female ensemble.

Before Your Very Eyes, another unconventional theater piece at the Public, also has a promising premise but fall short of being totally captivating. This Gob Squad creation features alternating casts of seven kids playing the cliches of growing up from punk teenagers to middle-aged failures

to geriatric zombies. The highlights are provided by video interviews between the performers' younger selves (filmed a few years ago) and their older alter egos. There are some striking images such as an irony-laden sequence with the youngsters dressed as menopausal wrecks lip-synching "Je Ne Regrette Rien." But these bits and the admittedly haunting video interactions are not enough to sustain even a 70-minute running time.

Misery: Nov. 15—Feb. 14. Broadhurst Theatre, 235 W. 44th St., NYC. Tue.—Thu., 7 p.m.; Fri., Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission; \$69—\$147; (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

Allegiance: Opened Nov. 8 for an open run. Longacre Theatre, 220 W. 48th St., NYC. Tue., Thu., 7 p.m.; Wed., Fri.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Wed., Sat., 2 p.m.; Sun., 3 p.m. Running time: two hours and 30 mins. including intermission; \$55—\$149; (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com.

First Daughter Suite: Oct. 21—Nov. 22 Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Tue.—Sun., 7 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 1 p.m. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission; \$65; (212) 967-7555 or www.publictheater.org.

Before Your Very Eyes: Oct. 7—Nov. 29. Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., NYC. Running time: 70 minutes with no intermission; \$45; (212) 967-7555 or www.publictheater.org.

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