

Cultural Daily

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Pathos and Froth: Mary Jane, As You Like It

David Sheward · Wednesday, October 4th, 2017

The single mother unfolds her sofa bed, gets undressed, and settles in to check over a huge binder containing medication levels for her seriously ill child. This simple scene is performed in a seemingly offhand manner by the magnificently subtle Carrie Coon as the title character in Amy Herzog's shattering play *Mary Jane*, yet it speaks volumes of a heartbreaking situation without tears or bathos. The fact that Mary Jane has to sleep alone in her living room tells us that Alex, her two-year-old son is in need of such constant and extensive medical support that the equipment required to keep him breathing takes up the master bedroom (which is offstage in Laura Jellinek's masterfully functional and evocation set design.) And, it incidentally emphasizes the not-insignificant detail that Alex's father is nowhere in her life. It's a beautiful demonstration of the playwright showing rather than telling the trials Mary Jane must go through.



Lisa Colon-Zayas and Carrie Coon in *Mary Jane*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

By indirect means, Herzog, Coon, and director Anne Kaufman, who just staged the similarly-themed *Marvin's Room* on Broadway for Roundabout Theater Company, reveal the overwhelming details of Mary Jane's stoic existence. Her son is the center of her universe. His challenges include cerebral palsy and lung damage. The mom's work, marriage, and personal life have all been put on indefinite hold as she juggles the multiple responsibilities necessary to get him adequate care. The play unfolds with compassion, yet at the same time, it's unsparing in its matter-of-factness. It opens literally in the kitchen sink as the female building super is unclogging the drain. Similar mundane vignettes are juxtaposed with the backbreaking routine of maintaining Alex's health. One minute Mary Jane is chatting with one of the many at-home nurses she employs about the latter's garden, then they seamlessly segue into debating if Alex had a seizure they night before.

Coon delivers the most heartbreaking, yet un-theatrical performances in recent memory. The almost casual manner with which she rattles off the merits of specially-equipped strollers belies the heartache inside. The pain comes through only occasionally but when it does it's devastating. Watch her face crumble as a doctor explains a difficult, decades-long diagnosis for Alex. Or witness her slowly building fury over the bureaucratic red-tape she must unravel just to schedule a visit from the music therapist. Four exemplary actresses play two roles each with equal conviction. Liza Colon-Zayas effortlessly switches a warm nurse to a all-business doctor. Susan Pourfar provides welcome comic relief as two different mothers in situations similar to the heroine's. Brenda Wehle gives quiet depth to the compassionate super and a Buddhist nun. Danaya Esperanza injects empathy into a visiting relative of Mary Jane's nurse and the music therapist. Kaufman's

straightforward, smooth staging is the perfect means to reveal this shattering portrait of how illness can complicate lives.



Ellen Burstyn and Hannah Cabell in *As You Like It*.

Credit: Lenny Stucker

While *Mary Jane* takes a hyper-realistic, no-nonsense view of a tragic situation, director-designer John Doyle gives us a hyper-whimsical slant on Shakespeare's already frothy *As You Like It*, now at CSC after a staging at the Bay Street Theater. The trouble is it's too whimsical if such a thing is possible. Plucky heroine Rosalind's charade in trousers to win the heart of the displaced Orlando is joyous and fun, but it exists against the backdrop of a dictatorial Duke exiling his just brother (Rosalind's dad) to the Forest of Arden. Doyle remembers the goofiness, but the stakes in the romance of the leads and the redemption of the refugees are not very high. Employing a pared-down, 100-minute, intermissionless script, a bare-bones set, and a lighter-than-air performance style, this *Like* zips along but doesn't stick.

There are moments of delight, chiefly during the musical interludes. This being a John Doyle production, most of the cast play their own instruments and Broadway's Stephen Schwartz (*Wicked*, *Pippin*, etc.) has supplied Rodgers-and-Hart-like music to accompany the Bard's lyrics.

The leads fail to offer much weight. Hannah Cabell's starchy Rosalind doesn't make much of a connection with Kyle Scatliffe's earnest Orlando. As a result, Quincy Tyler Berstine's wry Celia steals most of her scenes with her deadpan reactions to the implausible goings-on. Oscar-Tony-Emmy winner Ellen Burstyn dryly delivers the world-weary witticisms of Jacques, normally played by a male actor. Andre De Shields is a subdued jester and Bob Stillman attempts to create two distinct characters as both the nasty Duke and his virtuous sibling, but the action is so short and fast, not much registers in this soap-bubble Shakespeare.

Mary Jane: Sept. 25—Oct. 29. New York Theater Workshop, 79 E. 4th St., NYC. Ute-Wed 7pm, Thu-Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission. \$45-\$65. (212) 460-5475. www.nytw.org.

As You Like It: Sept. 28—Oct. 22. Classic Stage Company in association with Bay Street Theater at CSC, 136 E. 13th St., NYC. Tue-Thu 7pm, Fri 8pm, Sat 3pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: 100 minutes with no intermission. (212) 352-3101. www.classicstage.org.

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