

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Price of Family Un-Ties

Sylvie · Wednesday, February 25th, 2015

I started last week's review of *The Night Alive* by saying that there is nothing quite like a good Irish play. There isn't, but neither is there anything quite like a good Jewish-American play, such as Arthur Miller's *The Price*, now at The Mark Taper Forum.

Miller wrote this one in 1968 and what stands out in this powerful revival almost five decades later is the timelessness and durability of the writing. To say that *The Price* is about two brothers' attempt to sell off their deceased parents' houseful of furniture is to speak half the truth. *The Price* is not so much about the price of used furniture as it is about the cost of broken family ties.

And in this production we have a sharply written Jewish piece staged by a strong Irish director, Garry Hynes, the woman who introduced this country to the darkly humorous works of Martin McDonagh. It seems that the Jews and the Irish share at least one thing: a funny, clever, cutting and pernicious way with words.

The brothers — Victor, a cop, and Walter, a doctor — have been estranged for years. An issue of who sacrificed what for whom is at the heart of their long-festered dispute. Being brought together over the sale of parental "stuff" is scratching at deep and differing wounds in each of them. Their stabs at reconciliation, however, seem only to succeed in baring angrier layers of discontent. A used furniture dealer brought in to estimate the value of this booty, and Victor's endlessly unhappy wife Esther only muddy the troubled waters.

Esther is tired of scrimping to get by on Victor's slender wage,s while she sees his brother Walter apparently living it up as a successful surgeon. But, of course, all is not quite what it appears when we get to the down and dirty.

Despite Miller's skill at slowly (sometimes too slowly) unraveling the resentments, it takes a quartet of bracingly fine actors to keep us on the edge of our seats. Topping the list is the sprightly Alan Mandell as the appraiser, Gregory Solomon, a man in his nineties, who has forgotten none of his ploys. More than just wily, Mandell as Solomon keeps us laughing by diverting attention, delaying responses and spouting life lessons for everyone's benefit as only this leprechaun of the stage can do. We catch glimpses of his Estragon, the role he played to such sublime effect in Michael Arabian's memorable staging of *Waiting for Godot* at the Taper a couple of seasons ago. (Are we not all life's clowns — and only more so the older we get?)



Alan Mandell as Gregory Solomon in *THE PRICE*.

But Mandell is not working alone. Sam Robards as Victor, the dour cop on the beat, has the play's toughest role, mainly because, as his wife Esther rags him about, he seems stuck in his resentments and unwilling (or unable?) to shake his self-imposed shackles. Kate Burton's Esther is a woman who tries to help, but a woman on the brink, liking her cocktails a little too much these days, and ready to pack it all in if her reluctant husband doesn't stop making her crazy.



John Bedford Lloyd and Kate Burton in *THE PRICE*.

As the other brother Walter, John Bedford Lloyd has the flashier, but also more dangerous role in this family dynamic. Once cast as a villain by Victor, he needs to defend his actions and try to dispel what he feels is an unjust assumption. After the humor of the first act, the second one becomes a battleground, but under Hynes' sure-footed guidance, this tight-knit group delivers a charged and absorbing evening of theatre. It reminds us, yet again, of the stage's overwhelming power to engage our full attention with its subtle complexities.

Matt Saunders' set design consists largely of a mountain of stacked brown and drab furniture from an uninspired portion of the 1900s — so much furniture that one has to wonder just how spacious the apartment was that it all came from. The lighting by James F. Ingalls and costumes by Terese Wadden, richly complement the setting. However, this play is less about atmosphere than it is about words — those pesky, underhanded, indirect, soft and aggressive little killers that grab hold of us and don't easily let go.

WHAT: The Price

WHERE: Mark Taper Forum at the Music Center, 135 N. Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90012

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8 pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30 pm. Through March 22.

HOW: Tickets: \$25-\$85 (subject to change.) Available at (213) 628-2772 or in person at the Center Theatre Group box office or online at www.CenterTheatreGroup.org. **Hot Tix:** \$25, subject to availability, on the day of performance at the box office (no checks). **Groups:** (213) 972-7231. **Deaf community:** Information & charge, TDD (213) 680-4017.

Top image: L-R: Sam Robards and John Bedford Lloyd in Arthur Miller's classic drama ?The Price? at the Center Theatre

All photos by Craig Schwartz

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