The Wrong Engagement

Evan Smith’s farce about an accidental marriage tints British comedy with existential absurdity.

By Tony Adler

It’s like they’re consigning them to hell. —Audience member, speaking a little too loudly to her companion during a silence at the end of the October 6 performance of The Uneasy Chair

There are two trash cans placed side by side on stage in Samuel Beckett’s Endgame, and two people stuck inside them: Nagg and Nell, an old married couple. Well beyond their last legs, they spend a good deal of time peaking over their respective rims at each other, alternately cooing and bickering. Evan Smith’s The Uneasy Chair could be Nagg and Nell’s backstory—the tale of how they ended up in those trash cans. Albeit in a loose sort of way. Written in the late 1990s, Smith’s comedy was almost certainly inspired by Samuel Beckett’s classic British mode, so they are canny, practical, and tight in style. But as that outwitting themselves, Wickett and Pickles end up married to each other—a state from which a judge refuses to extricate them. Naturally, they consider this a disaster. But Smith treats it charmingly, as a fortunate misfortune. Flashing forward, he shows us Wickett and Pickles 25 years into what was already an autumnal marriage: addled, ornery, but essentially loving. Thanks to John’s well-meaning stewardship, they finish their last legs, unable to escape each other’s company while they swallow their last crumbs of consciousness. Hence the commentary about hell.

Here’s an idea: If we take Beckett's work seriously, there should be something more at stake. As it is, there are too many gags and too little substance to make the audience laugh, not to mention the fact that the performances by a triumvirate of veteran Chicago actors in the central roles: Greg Vinkler as Captain Wickett, Linda Kimbrough as Amelia Pickles, and Ross Lehman as a barrister, are all strong and precise during a passage in which Wickett briefly opens himself to the Wicketts might be Nagg and Nell: emblems of an age, an empire, and a set of social conventions consigned to the trash cans of history. Michael Halberstam’s production for Writers’ Theatre doesn’t deal explicitly with any of these matters. All smart pacing and arch delivery, it may get a little dull when there isn’t an astute old lady in the audience to provide subversive commentary. Genuinely enthralling here are the performances by a triumvirate of veteran Chicago actors in central roles: Greg Vinkler as Captain Wickett, Linda Kimbrough as Amelia Pickles, and Ross Lehman as a barrister, a judge, a nurse, a cleric, a bon vivant, and Amelia’s confidant, Nellie Thimble. Vinkler played Wickett last summer in a Door County production of the Wicketts might be Nagg and Nell: emblems of an age, an empire, and a set of social conventions consigned to the trash cans of history.

Reviews
The virtuosic Carmen Roman lifts Orpheus Descending to gothic grandeur.

By Justin Hayford

Carmen Roman is the ideal lead actress for Tennessee Williams’s Orpheus Descending, a singularly excessive play from a singularly effusive playwright. With her tightly wound black curls, oversize Italian features seemingly drawn on with Magic Marker, and a statuesque bearing that hardly restrains her girlish exuberance, she’s almost too much just standing onstage. When she comes into her own in the final hour of this three-hour performance, the effect is blistering. Orpheus Descending, Williams’s first professionally produced full-length play, was a double flop. It lasted all of two weeks when it played in 1940 as Battle of Angels in a pre-Broadway tryout. He continued to rewrite it over the next 17 years, but when it was staged in 1957 on Broadway under its new title, it died in less than two months despite lead performances by Maureen Stapleton and Cliff Robertson. Set in provincial Mississippi, the play focuses on Lady Torrance, locked in a loveless marriage with her spiteful dying husband, Jabe. Then smoldering, taciturn blues musician Valentine Xavier walks into her general store looking for work. Both have tragic pasts. Lady’s father, an Italian immigrant, was burned alive when local firefighters wouldn’t respond to a blaze on “the dago’s” vineyard. Val was abandoned by his family as an adolescent and took up a life of womanizing and petty crime, but at almost 30 he’s vowed to give it up. When Lady hires him as a sales clerk, hoping for spiritual rebirth with a man at least ten years younger, the backwoods gossip mill goes into overdrive. Williams builds his tragic saga with excruciating deliberation until all hell breaks loose in the third act. And that’s when Roman’s performance allows this American Theater Company revival to achieve the gothic grandeur the play needs: throughout the act, Roman keeps her character’s complicated, often contradictory emotions at a fever pitch. Lady’s delight at the prospect of escaping her barren life is juxtaposed with anguish over her squandered past, hatred of her controlling husband, terror at the townsperson’s threatened violation continued on page 32
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ence, and despair over the hopelessness of her position. Her treatment of Val runs the gamut from adoration to vitriolic attack and back again every few minutes. Yet through all the emotional chaos shines a cogent, painfully human character poised between salvation and damnation. Steve Key's self-contained Val is an apt foil for Roman's performance, and the many supporting characters keep the details clear. But she towers over everyone; nothing else seems to matter—or even exist. By the time the play's over, Williams's genius is manifest in all its grotesque glory. Roman's tour de force is all the more impressive because it comes out of nowhere: the first two acts of director Damon Kiely's production are for the most part emotionally schematic and brusque, almost matter-of-fact. Even Roman mostly parcels out her character into distinct emotional states that rarely blend into a satisfying whole. This approach runs roughshod over Williams's turgid lyricism, shrinking a star-crossed love to pulp fiction and turning archetypally evil southern busybodies into caricatures. The action lacks intrigue and complication, though the back wall of designer Keith Pitt's set supplies them in spades, in a chiaroscuro assemblage of elegantly ugly junk.

Perhaps Kiely made the common directorial mistake of forgetting to reexamine the beginning of his production once he discovered the end. And perhaps, considering how powerful the end he and Roman have found, an equally powerful beginning might still be attained.

Orpheus Descending

JOHNNY KNIGHT

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The Seldoms’ new piece at (and in) the Hamlin Park pool is a tribute to uncertainty.

By Laura Molzahn

In a culture obsessed with doctrine, statistics, and the bottom line, what’s the value of uncertainty? Of losing your bearings instead of finding them? Of imagination? Of theater?

Choreographer Carrie Hanson takes on such questions in a new piece for the Seldoms, *Giant Fix*. Staged in an empty outdoor pool, it’s based on personal experience: with her eyes closed before going to sleep, she explains in her notes to the piece, she sometimes sees images that change size and shape dramatically.

“Everything in this place slips around—scale, comprehension, footing,” she writes. In *Giant Fix* six dancers move about, mostly up and down the length of the pool, while lights, projections, and live electronic music wash over the action. The audience is seated either at the shallow or the deep end, so a lot of the time you’re either very close to the dancers or very far from them.

Though the piece is somewhat dreamlike, it isn’t nearly as organized as a dream. There’s no narrative, no characterization, and little emotion. The environment itself plays a huge role, adding a kind of randomness and serendipity that places this theatrical piece in the continu- um of everyday life. I heard not only the music but a car revving near the action, building subtly but unmistakably to a climax.

Lunsford’s music suggests all sorts of recognizable sounds—grunting, squeaking, whispering, Japanese percussion, free jazz—but it’s a far more surreal mix than even the most random auditory experience. It also rises and flows and ebbs with the length during a brief break, becoming more compelling over the hour-long piece. Despite some odd, fascinating duets in the first half—as when one couple rolls apart while two others walk slowly, effortfully, one partner leaning on the other in a nearly horizontal position—the performers seem more connected to one another in the second.

Certain moments stand out: one dancer briefly, companionably, placing a hand on another’s back between the shoulder blades; dancers seemingly twirling others with hands placed gently atop heads; all six performers embracing and then slowly separating while still holding hands; a final whirling fall to the pool floor and an inching forward, facedown. The chill in the air the night I attended made me hyperaware of the dancers’ bare feet and arms: their contact with the pool’s walls or floor sent shivers down my spine, heightening the usual tactility of watching dance.

The most striking thing about *Giant Fix* is the sense of community it creates—a paradoxical notion when you consider the piece has such a personal source. Sometimes such subjectivity in art can seem unproductive and self-indulgent, perhaps especially so in times of war and natural disaster. Suffering and calamity seem to have produced a greater need for certainty in our country and a heightening of doctrinal differences. People seldom talk about humanism these days—it seems like a luxury we can no longer afford.

Hanson’s emphasis on shifting perspectives and on the interconnectedness of art and life reminds us of the value of humanism, of gentleness and uncertainty and imagination, even of relativism. You’re constantly aware that the people at the other end of the pool are seeing something very different from what you’re seeing. And sometimes it’s good to be reminded that the only rule is that there are no rules.