A Touch of Vaudeville

Steve Vineberg


When Brian Bedford makes his first appearance as the dandy Sir Harcourt Courcy in the invigorating production of Dore Manic's A Touch of Jonathan at New York's Roundabout Theatre, what we're seeing, in a delectably prolonged moment, is the whole history of theatrical entrances. He glides onto the stage with preening fatty-ness like a real cock on a conveyor belt, flashing a dimpled smile and gently shaking his bearded head as if to catch the light from several angles at once. Bedford is acknowledging the audience the way a star in this role would have around the time Boucicaut wrote the play (1841).

What modernizes his theatricality is that this first image of him is actually consistent with the rest of his performance: he plays Sir Harcourt as a man so enraptured of the figure he imagines he can't use in the social world that every time he enters a room, he is—in his own mind, at least—a beloved personage ailing onto a stage. And what makes Bedford's performance not just modern but contemporary is the edge of irony in his entrance, glittering like tinsel. "See? This is how it was done," the actor is telling us. "Hein't this style sily?" Then he stems to add, with a barely perceptible wink, "And don't you just love it?"

Joe Dowling's revival of London Assurance is a tribute to Boucicaut, for whom playwriting was so finely honed a craft that he could turn out literally hundreds of plays (some in England, some in America), and who presented himself, unapologetically, as a commercial entertainer. The delight my Saturday matinee audience at the Roundabout took in both Bedford's performance and the play, with its comedy-of-manners feel and its miraculously engineered—and ridiculous—farce machinations, was similar to the kind of response theatregoers are having to the Kander-Ebb musical Chicago, which Walter Bobbie and Ann Reinking have remounted in a loving tribute to Bob Fosse, the director-choreographer of the original mid-

whirligig of a play, as commercial as that other richly enjoyable gossip about theatrical life, the Kaufman-Feuer comedy about the Barrymores, The Royal Family. No, Coward didn't have Roland Maule flash Garry Essendine could not have written away with it in 1946. He also didn't come up with the supreme slow-burn touch of having the socialist Lady Salathun (Judith Ivey) enter with a disabusedness in the middle of Act Two so that it can end up nestled in Frank Langella's arms, kicking his face, as the curtain falls. He didn't think of it.

The play, premised on Coward's jokey self-portrait, is an increasingly postposterous series of scenarios, piled on top of one another until the whole thing becomes unmanageable. And the thing that when the plot comes crashing down is meant to be immensely satisfying, like the floods and flash fires and other grandiose stage effects in the spectacle-melodramas of the last century (and to D. W. Griffith's movies, which translated them, with a you-can't-beat-this-frenzy, to the big screen). The play doesn't play to the dangling strands of the plot together at the end; he simply leaves Roland Maule locked offstage in the spare room and of Coward's aristocrats locked off the other side in the library and has Garry retreat to the shelter of his ex-wife's apartment, imploring her to stop him up a two-room release if it woman to take him back because she's the only one who can keep him out of trouble. Their hushed exit together echoes the moment at the end of Private Lives when Garry and his new wife pretend to be married and then with him to him, both love her from her inadequate marriage to a well-meaning pug and go off, bound together forever in a bond of entirely anti-social love in devotion. The difference is that the end of Present Laughter lacks the emotional weight of the earlier two. Coward was doing it for just money.

Present Laughter is set in Essendine's London flat over the period of the week or so before he traipses off on tour to Africa with a new perspective. (Perry's version of the same period back to the spring of 1939, before the Blitz and the rationing took the flash out of English fashion— a little gift to his set and costume designers, Derek McLane and Ann Roth, who come through magnificently for him.) In this brief interlude between shows, Garry manages to have a one-night stand with former flame Daphne Stillington (the talented Kelli Overy, a memorable Shelly in Gary Sinise's production of Buried Child last year), whom he puts off in the morning with an antiquated speech about how his dedication to the theatre dooms him to solitude. She's more resilient than he counted on, however; he gains a sense of having made a complete and quite final move when later he induces Lady Salathun with a few minutes' audience for her aspiring actress niece, not realizing it's his Victorian actress who will return. Garry's ex-wife Liz (Allison Janney) drops by to inform him that his producer, Morris (David Cale), is probably sleeping with Joanna (Orlagh Cassidy), the wife of his banker, Henry (Jeff Weiss), impuling their whole colaborative enterprise. She leaves to Garry to wean the truth from Morris, but he screw up the assignment: he falls for Morris's protestations of innocence, and then to get to pass on a few salacious details to his・・・
some that she made me think of some exotic jungle beast. But the only actor on the stage who's really a match for Frank Langella is Allison Janney. Janney is probably best known to audiences as Tony Shalhoub's girlfriend in The Big Night, but she's had better parts. She was heartbreaking, for example, in the lynching scene in "Old Friends," the final episode of the TV show Law and Order to feature Michael Moriarty as Assistant DA Ben Stone. She played a trapped innocent, an entrepreneur whose testimony against her mobster partner Stone forces, getting her killed in the process; then he resigns in despair over her death. But she's not going to stand in that episode, telling a truth she knows will sign her death warrant, and then saw her shimmering high-conomic veneer in Present Laughter, you might have to pause for a moment, as I did, before realizing it's the same actress.

If Scott Elliott's production is self-indulgent, then so is Coward's play. After all, it's Coward, not Elliott, who tossed in Essendine's lecture to Roland Maule:

To begin with, your play is not a play at all. It's a meaningless jumble of adolescent, pseudo-intellectual pop-corn. It bears no relation to the subject or the thing whatsoever—I would like to tell you this. If you wish to be a playwright you just leave the theater of tomorrow to take care of itself. Go and get yourself a job in a repertory company if they'll have you. Learn from the ground up how plays are constructed and what is actable and what isn't. Then sit down and write at least twenty plays one after the other, if you can make out to see forty. This is the first-guessed-for-a Sunday night performance you'll be God-damned lucky!

Coward couldn't resist; he felt that he knew better than anyone how plays are constructed and what is actable and what isn't. Watching this Present Laughter, you're not inclined to argue. The title of the play borrow's from Twelfth Night: "What is love? Is it not hereafter/Present youth hath present laughter." What the play actually is, is to read in these lines a defense for mirth, for fleeting joys, since life is ephemeral. He believed that being a provider of mirth was a worthwhile way to spend your life.

It is self-indulgence to make a four-hour movie of Shakespeare's Hamlet? In his 1948 version Laurence Olivier excelled in Fortinbras, and Richard Burton in Laertes. I anticipate that the title of the play borrows from Twelfth Night: "What is love? Is it not hereafter/Present youth hath present laughter." What the play actually is, is to read in these lines a defense for mirth, for fleeting joys, since life is ephemeral. He believed that being a provider of mirth was a worthwhile way to spend your life.

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isn't so much of an egotist that he can't appreciate other performers; in all of his movies except Peter's Friends, he's unlike his generosity to his fellow actors (and his lack of generosity in Peter's Friends may have been partly the consequence of disastrously misconceived material). In Much Ado, he uses it with Jack the Ripper in Washington as the Prisoner, Michael Keaton as Dogberry, and the young Robert Sean Leonard as Claudius; Hamlet features— in addition to just Denholm as Marcellus—Billy Crystal as the Gravedigger, Robin Williams as the court of昼夜，Gerard Depardieu as Reynaldo, and, cast opposite the elegant Tony Hartley as Polonius, a thoroughly impersonal Waylon. The rest of the cast is English and includes John Gielgud, Judi Dench, John Mills, and Richard Attenborough in walk-ons. The only bright spot in the casting of Leemon and Depardieu is that their roles are so tiny, and Williams, who contributed a memorable few comic scenes as a guest star in Dead Again, does nothing here you haven't seen him do before. But only a purist could object to Crystal's Catskills kibitzing in the graveyard scene, and even a purist might concede that this scene is about legacy: Branagh's making the observation that Shakespeare's clowns were the stage's comedians of their day. And his direction of Heston humanizes this actor in a way no previous screen role has; he and Harris are— who would have guessed it— a terrific match.

Michael Maloney's overly exuberant Laertes and the confusion in Richard Briers's Polonius, the principal actors gathered around Branagh's river, his performance are rock solid. Kate Winslet is a moving Ophelia, especially in the nunry scene (which I've never seen better played or better directed, even by Olivier and Jean Simmons). Nicholas Farrell taps deep reserves of feeling in his portrayal of Horatio. Timothy Spall and Reece Dinsdale make a fine Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though I couldn't help thinking that, pace Tom Stoppard, a little of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern goes a long way. Julie Christie's litigious Gertrude, glibbing through the Danish court in exquisite gowns that suggest that designer Alex Byrne must, quite sensibly, be filled with love for her. Christie's one of the great modern movie actresses; the revelation here is that she can command Shakespeare's verse, too. Perhaps her rendition of the quintessentially sensual and sensible, doing yet capable of understanding, will kill off those fatuous, empty-headed Gertrudes we've all seen. The most interesting idea in Branagh's and Christie's treatment of this character is that, once Claudius has stowed Hamlet away to England, she becomes disillusioned with her husband, she sees him treat Laertes' rebellious return to England as a polical problem rather than a human one, and his instinct toward self-preservation rather than complex distances her. She realizes, with a jolt, that she's married a stranger.

Derek Jacobi's Claudius is the ultimate political animal, so skilful at presenting himself as a warm and caring monarch that, for his first few scenes, we're taken in too. (Jacobi is brilliant.) Or we would be, if Hamlet's inky cloak and his refusal to hide his mourning mood weren't presented in cruel contrast to Claudius's smiling countenance as he plays to the crowd. Claudius escorts Gertrude, still wearing her wedding clothes, into court and makes a public exhibition of their happiness; Hamlet Oliver, of the middle of the celebration and keeps his words to both his uncle and his mother quiet, understated, as if insisting on the privacy—and the appropriate decorum for the months following a funeral—that Claudius is violating. Later, in the monstrap scene, Hamlet pulls a cunning reversal: he leads down to the stage in the middle of the traveling players' show and annotates it publicly, directing his comments to the king and queen, so that the entire focus of the court audience shifts away from the play and up to the royal couple seated on the highest tier of the theater. He beats Claudius at his own game—and that's when Claudius becomes truly dangerous.

Shakespeare wrote this man as a politician, of course; Branagh isn't making anything up. But no production I've seen of Hamlet has exposed the layers of political corruption in the Danish court as convincingly as Branagh's. He plays the "To be or not to be" soliloquy not as a reverse on suicide but as a moral debate on ways of being in the world, in an immense room circled with mirrored doors. Behind one of them—a two-way mirror—Claudius hides, spying on his nephew. When Ophelia enters, Hamlet is passionate with her; but she's so nervous with him that eventually he cottons onto the fact that they're playing a public scene, not a private one. That's when he locates Claudius. He talks right to the two-way mirror, so his line about how all married couples but one should live is a direct threat. And you can see in Jacob's face that Claudius gets it.

Branagh's ideas are all there in his adaptation, which is a superlative example of the role of a screenwriter in bringing drama to the screen. (His nomination for the Adapted Screenplay Oscar generated the usual jokes about stealing credit for transcribing Shakespeare, but the writers among the Academy voters knew exactly what they were doing: the boundlessly versatile adaptation isn't necessarily a matter of adding dialogue.) The reason the movie is such a knockout is that Branagh thinks both theetically and cinematically— the way Olivier and Orson Welles, both men of the theater, thought. He's able to drive through his Hamlet, in a four-hour stretch so speedy it feels almost reckless, and acknowledging that the play is even more a feat of showmanship than it is a literary masterwork. The coup is Branagh pulls off, like the mirrored soliloquy and the anatomy of the Claudius-Gertrude marriage, are dependent on an understanding that the power of theater and film to move us and deepen our awareness of human interaction is inseparable from their power to entertain us. Branagh's Errol Flynn moves are part of the Hamlet package; so is Billy Crystal's vivaceously funny shock. Branagh's being a vaudevillian in his soul makes him even more of a Shakespearean.