

New York

GLEND A FRANK



A scene from *John* by Annie Baker directed by Sam Gold at Pershing Square Signature Theatre, where Baker is resident dramatist. Photo: Matthew Murphy.

With the Charlie Parker Jazz Festival in full swing this is a wonderful time for outdoor music, but it's a sad August for New York theatre. There is no joy in these productions, no creative zest or significant tragic vision, sometimes not even a clear message (although I'm certainly a believer that if you want to send a message, hire Western Union.) I am maintaining the fantasy that the New York International Fringe Festival has kidnapped all the talent, but current reviews don't sustain that hope.

Performances of *John* by Annie Baker are selling out at the Pershing Square Signature Theatre off-Broadway. It runs over 3 hours and is well directed by Sam Gold, an Annie Baker regular. Baker has won a Pulitzer Prize, Obie Awards, a Guggenheim fellowship and is now resident playwright at Signature Theatre – much to the bewilderment of many playwrights and theatregoers.

John never appears on stage, but he is referenced twice as a mysterious figure who destroys lives. The play opens with the

arrival of Elias and Jenny at a bizarre bed and breakfast in Gettysburg, PA. Jenny is young, cute, passive-aggressive and not very successful at living. She is always cold, is terrified by dolls, and collapses during her menses. She is visiting Gettysburg because Elias, a drummer who earns his living with computers, has become fascinated by the Civil War. It is obvious something is wrong with this relationship. Elias, struggling to open a dialogue, becomes aggressive, which shuts her down as she denies there is a problem.

And so ends the drama. For the rest of the play, we learn about the host's two husbands, meet her blind friend Genevieve, who spent years in a mental institution for paranoia, and discover with Elias that Jenny has been texting someone named John. The play ends with a devastated Elias seated between the two elderly women. One reviewer called it a ghost story.

The play and direction were designed to awaken interest. The stories are like gossip, tidbits that lead nowhere but may stimulate the imagination. Mertis, the host

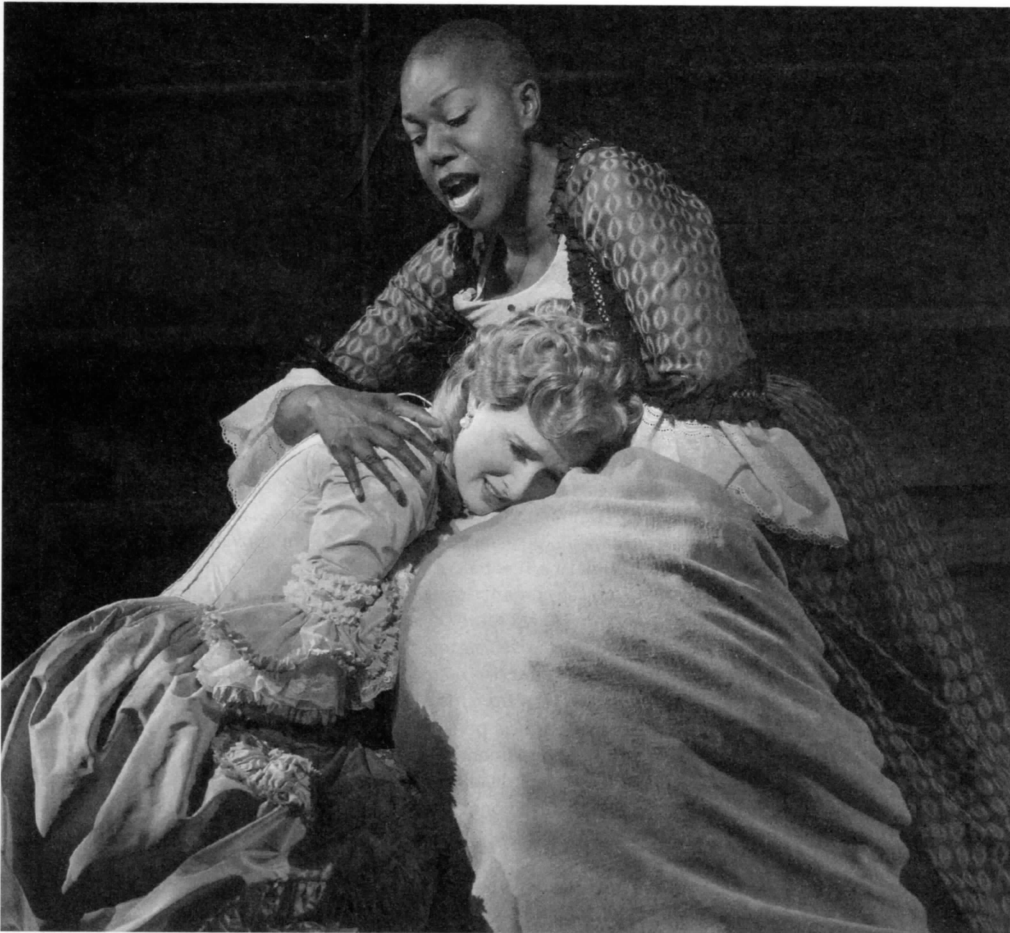
of the bed & breakfast, is played by Georgia Engel a comic actress famous for her little-girl voice. The gruff Lois Smith plays Genevieve. They form another odd couple. Hong Chau is Jenny; the Asian casting was unsettlingly stereotypical. Christopher Abbott is Elias, whose situation is the easiest to relate to, but none of the characters is unappealing.

Yet completely wonderful and always engaging is the set design by Mimi Lien. The offstage rooms have historical names and secret alcoves. The dining room, which abuts the living room on stage, is called Paris. There are knick-knacks everywhere. Dolls and stuffed toys line the staircase; miniature homes lighted by candles decorate the living room. As a matter of fact, all the small spaces are individually lighted. Toward the end of the play, the Christmas tree and other lights flicker on and off, creating a visual drama (Mark Barton, lighting). Alexis Soloski of *The Guardian* wrote: 'You can't take your eyes off the play.' She was probably thinking of the set design. It was not unpleasant to sit through the

play; it was like a little vacation.

It is clear in this production that Annie Baker is going for the operatic, the magnification of emotion. And she is successful. Each situation touches us: Jenny's need to exit the relationship and her betrayal of Elias, Mertis's caring for a beloved (unseen) husband who is ill, and Genevieve's belief that the world is against her. Are we richer for the experience? Some of us left feeling short-changed.

Amazing Grace at the Nederlander Theatre is a musical about the transformation of John Newton (Josh Young, of *Jesus Christ Superstar* fame) from slave trader to abolitionist and the composer of the eponymous hymn. It should have been a profoundly moving experience. All the visual effects (Eugene Lee and Edward Pierce, set; Toni-Leslie James, costumes; Ken Billington and Paul Miller, lighting) are spot on, but the production, with book by Christopher Smith and Arthur Giron and directed by Gabriel Barre, is at once melodramatic and



Erin Mackey and Laiona Michelle in Gabrielle Barre's production of *Amazing Grace* at the Nederlander Theatre about John Newton, the composer of the hymn, who is played by Josh Young. Photo: Loan Marcus.

cliché-ridden. The musical is packaged as an old-style adventure tale about a bad boy who finds redemption and love, which seems to miss the central point of Newton's story. Most disappointing is the music (by Christopher Smith), which rarely reaches the bar set by the hymn.

There are, however, some magnificent performances by minor characters. It is a joy to hear Erin Mackey's clear soprano although her role as Mary Catlett, Newton's fiancée, is two-dimensional. Matching her emotional intensity in song is Laiona Michelle, Mary's black nanny, in her one song 'Daybreak.' Chuck Cooper's Pakuteh/Thomas, Newton's man servant and surrogate father, is another underwritten role. Even silent, Cooper is a powerful presence and with his few lines, he proves an emotive performer with a big voice. His double betrayal by Newton is heart-rending and made even more powerful in his song 'Nowhere Left to Run.' We can't forgive Newton until Pakuteh (claiming his native rather

than his Anglican name) forgives him. Talent like this should occupy the spotlight. That it does not is a clear indication that something is askew.

Informed Consent, off Broadway at the Duke Theatre on West 42nd St., is a Sloan baby. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation through Ensemble Studio Theatre (EST) has been offering substantial grants to writers for plays about science. Playwright Deborah Zoe Laufer is a recipient, and the play sounds great in the abstract. A woman suffering from early onset Alzheimer's is engaged in a genetic study of an isolated Native-American tribe in order to find a cure for inherited diabetes.

The problem is the execution. The cast of five playing multiple roles is not engaging or inspired. And our heroine, a mother worried about her daughter's inheriting the Alzheimer gene, is the villain. Despite the warning of her supervisor, who worked with the reclusive tribe for decades, she helicopters in, persuades a local

woman to help her, and then transforms the data, which offer no insight in diabetes, into lectures that fall far beyond the legal limits of her study. The tribe is distressed. She sweet-talks them. They sue, and she is fired. At one point the play implies that all knowledge systems are of equal value: the scientific, the mythic and the religious. Our heroine has become an out-of-control scientist. Shades of Dr. Moreau and his island and Frankenstein's experiments. *Informed Consent* leaves us dangling, a warning against scientists and genetic testing.

There is, however, a real glimmer of light this summer. More women playwrights are having their work produced, sometimes in conjunction with women directors. The Huffington Post calls 2015 the year of the woman. With women playwright still below 20% of all produced theatre, it is time for a change. And whether I admire the work of these women or not, I salute them for persevering and succeeding to get their visions staged.

BROADWAY LISTINGS:

Aladdin, New Amsterdam Theatre; *Allegiance*, Longacre; *Amazing Grace*, Nederlander; *An American in Paris*, Palace Theatre; *Beautiful - the Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *China Doll*, Schoenfeld; *The Color Purple*, Bernard B. Jacobs; *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Nighttime*, Barrymore; *Dames at Sea*, Helen Hayes; *Fiddler on the Roof*, Broadhurst; *Fool for Love*, Samuel J. Friedman; *Fun Home*, Circle in the Square; *Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, Walter Kerr; *The Gin Game*, John Golden; *Fool for Love*, Samuel J. Friedman; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Hand to God*, Booth; *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, Belasco; *The Illusionists*, Neil Simon; *It Shoulda Been You*, Brooks Atkinson; *Jersey Boys*, August Wilson; *The King and I*, Vivian Beaumont; *King Charles III*, Music Box; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *Les Misérables*, Imperial; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *Matilda the Musical*, Shubert; *Misery*, Broadhurst; *Old Times*, American Airline; *On Your Feet*, Marquis; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *School of Rock*, Winter Garden; *Something Rotten*, St. James; *Spring Awakening*, Brooks Atkinson; *Sylvia*, Cort; *Thérèse Raquin*, Studio 54; *A View from the Bridge*, Lyceum; *Wicked*, Gershwin.