

Glenda Frank in New York

Every supposition I made this summer was wrong. Well, half wrong. Having read Shakespeare's *Troilus and Cressida* in college, I assumed the August production by the Public Theater in Central Park would be agony to watch, but it was a joy, filled with provocative choices. *Oslo* -- the much raved-about new play at the Mitzi E. Newhouse Theatre at Lincoln Center which is slated to move upstairs to the Vivian Beaumont, a Broadway theatre -- was a mixed bag. Surprises make theatre engaging, and this summer has been much more than a sleepy interlude before the autumn openings.

Shakespeare was a playwright, an actor, and a businessman who competed against other playwrights as well as others at bearbaiting and cockfighting, so he devised characters and scenes to shock his audiences. Shylock appeared on stage during a ban on Jews in England; the "Moors" Othello and Aaron are warriors with highborn white lovers; and the reluctant Isabella is obliged to forgo the nunnery to marry the Duke. A tamed shrew and unfaithful women drew the masses. The word "pander" for a pimp derives

from the name Pandarus, a character in *Troilus and Cressida*.

Daniel Sullivan has transformed the play with its potent characters like Pandarus into a neglected masterpiece. In most of Shakespeare's drama, the ingénue (like Helena in *All's Well that Ends Well*) or the young lovers are the moral compass, but in the cynical *Troilus and Cressida*, the young Trojan warriors Troilus and his older brother Hector become our guides. They display courage and integrity.

In the early scenes, Troilus' love laments and Cressida's sudden changes of heart make the play seem like an early draft, but Sullivan found the elusive arc. When we meet Cressida (Ismenia Mendes) she is excessively modest, but once Troilus (Andrew Burnap) declares his long-term crush, events escalate at a surprising pace. The love scene is touching, but again the vows seem over-the-top -- as they do in *Romeo and Juliet*. The test comes when Cressida is forced from Troilus' bed by Trojan decree so that she must join her traitorous father in the Greek camp. There the Greek warriors surround the girl and demand kisses. Diomedes rescues her. Sullivan tamps down the

incipient terror in order to segue to Cressida offering Diomedes (Zach Appelman) her bracelet, a love token from Troilus. Watching the exchange from hiding, Troilus vows to kill more Greeks in battle. This betrayal signals a poisoning of human relationships.

And so the dramatic focus shifts to Hector (Bill Heck, Horace in *The Orphans' Home Cycle*) in a scene that is slightly slowed for impact. Lovesick, Achilles (Louis Cancelmi in a strong, nuanced performance) and Troilus have begged off from battle. In contrast, Hector ignores premonitions from his family (Miguel Perez as Priam, Tala Ashe as Andromache) and goes to the battlefield determined to defend the honour of Troy. He is magnificent; even as he speaks, we mourn for him. This is not Homer's Hector: this is every hero of lost causes. His murder on the battleground echoes the stabbing assassination of Julius Caesar. By ignoring the title, director Sullivan has found a way to transform the play. We don't just understand it; we feel the poignancy and the implications: the fall of Troy and descent into moral chaos.

Casting the inimitable John Glover (Tony for the play *Love! Valour! Compassion!*) as Pandarus

was inspired. Glover plays Pandarus's moral turpitude as physical ailments. Resplendent in an ironic white suit (the colour of purity), limping, and coughing, he arranges a tryst and urges the lovers to consummate their passion immediately. He hands out business cards and delivers the prologue and epilogue, setting the tone that colours all the events.

In Sullivan's production minor characters often snare the spotlight. Take the astonishing Max Casella as Thersites, a foul-mouthed Greek. It takes him only six words to make the audience laugh, and each time he appears the speeches are funnier, the attitude bolder, the comic genius brighter. Alex Breux has good moments as Ajax, a dumb jock.

More attitude (or subtext or stronger super-objectives) would have worked wonders for Central Park's Delacorte Theater modern-dress production of *The Taming of the Shrew* in June. Director Phyllida Lloyd staged all-women productions of *Julius Caesar* and *Henry IV* at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, but this is my first opportunity to see her work.

Lloyd contextualized the play by opening and closing it with beauty pageants and highlighting the market aspects of the daughters (their large dowries) with a suitcase of money as a prop. But I had trouble remaining engaged. Instead I found myself evaluating the cross dressing and the costuming. Even the brawls between the sisters had lost their edge, and the rivalry throughout that forms the dramatic highpoints was muted.

The one exception was Janet McTeer as Petruchio. Toothpick thin and sexually ambiguous rather than male, she exuded sex appeal and attitude. Even the campy bits worked as she strutted or grabbed her crotch. She had fun with the role and even offered new insights. Her Petruchio aimed not just to control Kate but to seduce her, and he relished any kind of challenge. As Kate, Cush Jumbo whose work I have admired

Left: Janet McTeer (Petruchio) in *The Public Theater's free Shakespeare in the Park production of The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by Phyllida Lloyd. Photo: Joan Marcus.





Anthony Azizi, Dariush Kashani, Michael Aronov, Joseph Siravo (foreground), Jennifer Ehle and Jefferson Mays (background) in a scene from *Oslo*.
Photo: T. Charles Erickson.

on *The Good Wife*, always seemed reasonable -- which is not a quality I associate with Kate, whose rage was fuelled by being supplanted by her younger sister and then expected to wed a stranger and become his property.

Unfortunately the scene in which Kate obeys Petruchio and stomps on her new hat was as repellent as always, so Lloyd created new follow-up scenes in which Kate tries on obedience, is greatly rewarded for playing the game, and then is driven mad because of this self-betrayal. Sister Bianca (a lively Gayle Rankin), waiting in the wings, reaps the gains. The new ending felt preachy rather than emotionally satisfying. I am always happy when women actors are allowed more opportunities, but on the way home I remembered how Tracey Ullman as Kate and Morgan Freeman as Petruchio (in a 1990 production, also with a cowboy theme and directed by A. J. Antoon at the Delacorte Theater) fought so violently that it seemed the stage would ignite; when Ullman's Kate conceded in the closing scene, you were convinced that Round 1 was over, but that there was more to come in this skewed battle of the sexes.

Oslo by J.T. Rogers is his first play since the Lincoln Center Theater-commissioned *Blood and Gifts* (2011). It is at once exciting and disappointing. The title refers to the peace accords held in Norway that resulted in the 1993 truce between the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel. It earned Yasser Arafat, Shimon Peres, and Yitzhak Rabin a Nobel Peace Prize in 1994. In the play, true to fact, Norwegian diplomat Mona Juul (a charming Jennifer Ehle, *The Real Thing*) and her husband, the social scientist Terje Rød-Larsen (the charismatic Jefferson Mays, *A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*) initiated the talks. Rød-Larsen believed peace was possible if both sides actually talked directly to each other, and he and his wife were willing to risk their jobs to test the theory. At the end of the play, the characters align on an imaginary chess board and we learn their fates: many -- among them Anwar Sadat who negotiated peace between Israel and Egypt in 1978 -- died violent deaths.

There are funny moments, emotional outbursts, and compelling segments in *Oslo*, in particular when the first team of Israelis, Ron Pundak (Daniel Jenkins) and Yair Hirschfeld (Daniel Oreskes), two private individuals, are replaced by more goal-oriented diplomats. Bartlett Sher (*Light in the Piazza* and also

Rogers' *Blood and Gifts*) directed, which almost ensures sure-footed performances and crisp scenes.

The problem is the script. At three hours it's self-indulgent and unfocused. The conversation between the Norwegian facilitators is often hard to follow and distracting, particularly when a Norwegian cook who plans a pork roast for the participants is excessively prominent. Characters are stereotyped. And at times when there should be insight into the secret process underfoot, there are the usual rumours. I had the feeling there is much more to the story.

My favourite scene occurs late in the play. The participants have been laying their lives on the line, and they taunt Rød-Larsen for not risking anything in hosting the talks. He is astonished. He thought they would feel gratitude. At the end he and his wife are excluded from the Clinton banquet that celebrates the agreement. Yes, they agree, the process has not been about them.

Glenda Frank can be contacted at playsinternational@theater-research-institute.eu

BROADWAY LISTINGS

Aladdin, New Amsterdam; *An American in Paris*, Palace; *Beautiful -- the Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *Cats*, Neil Simon; *The Cherry Orchard*, American Airlines; *Chicago the Musical*, Ambassador; *Cirque du Soleil, Paramour*, Lyric; *The Color Purple*, Bernard B. Jacobs; *The Encounter*, John Golden; *Falsettos*, Walter Kerr; *Fiddler on the Roof*, Broadway; *Frankie Valli and the Four Seasons on Broadway*, Lunt-Fontanne; *The Front Page*, Broadhurst; *The Great Comet*, Imperial; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Heisenberg*, Samuel J. Friedman; *Holiday Inn*, Studio 54; *The Humans*, Schoenfeld; *Jersey Boys*, August Wilson; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *Les Liaisons Dangereuses*, Booth; *Lewis Black: Black to the Future*, Marquis; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *Matilda the Musical*, Shubert; *Oh, Hello on Broadway*, Lyceum; *On Your Feet*, Marquis; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *School of Rock*, Winter Garden; *Something Rotten*, St. James; *Waitress*, Brooks Atkinson; *Wicked*, Gershwin.