

New York

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When a director with a vision meets actors who get it *and* have the gifts to bring it home to the audience, no-one talks about theatre as a dying art. Often they stand and cheer. But in some recent shows here, only half the audiences have felt celebratory because they too can only envision the older, staler way of presentation. It's such a shame - to miss the magic right in front of their eyes.

This is what happened in the Roundabout production at Studio 54 of *Thérèse Raquin*. Keira Knightley deserves an award for this Broadway debut as a repressed orphan who is forced into a marriage she loathes, discovers sexual awakening with her husband's friend, and then is tormented by guilt for a murder she wished, but did not commit. The script by, Helen Edmundson, is based on the novel by Emile Zola. Believing that life is predetermined by heredity and environment, Naturalists like Zola adopted a cold, unrelenting style as disaster inevitably unfolded. Director Evan Cabnet elected a semi-Expressionistic style for this stage adaptation, employing a combination of stylised, silent film, and realistic dramatics. Knightley as Thérèse appears in an unflattering beige dress, so stiff she almost seems catatonic. She is the living embodiment of Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*. The character has been reared by her aunt, who adores her chronically ill son (Gabriel Ebert), who dominates the family. Thérèse is an after-thought. You can almost feel her revulsion at the idea of sharing a room with her new husband's sick smell. Her favourite seat is by the window in Beowulf Boritt's darkly evocative set. And then Laurent (Matt Ryan) arrives and the sexual temperature rises. The character becomes bold and assertive, and when he responds, the taciturn woman becomes loquacious, hungry, and appealing. Her daring is breath-taking. Her actions say: 'finally, there is something in life for me'. But we know Laurent is a self-serving ne'er-do-well, unlike her steady husband. And then there is the drowning, a clumsy, almost botched attempt that throws Thérèse back into her emotional

prison. She sleepwalks through the marriage to Laurent and the congratulations, awakening to life only when her new husband offers her the means to free herself. Cabnet's directorial choices and Knightley's stylised performance enabled me to empathise with Thérèse for the first time. In this production, the play was clearly viewed through her eyes. After the death of the son, the aunt (Judith Light) seems not autocratic but warm and loving, and then she becomes a still, menacing figure in a wheelchair. The clever lighting by Keith Parham not only spotlights Knightley so the play never shifts focus, but also becomes a metaphor for freedom - in the brighter love scenes, as the light from the window, as a steady clarifier against the darkness of the heavy furniture and the costumes (Jane Greenwood).

Sylvia by A. A. Guiney at the Cort Theatre, in contrast, is loved by audiences and critics alike. And after a creative slump, director Dan Sullivan is back at the top of his game. Each member of the cast is an audience draw, and each delights us, but Annaleigh Ashford as the lovable poodle is even more amazing than she was in *You Can't Take It with You* and *Kinky Boots*. She has poodle down flat, from the tip-toe walk to the independent attitude, and intelligence. When her adopted owner - she chose him in Central Park - calls her 'good girl,' she grins at us. When he pets her ear, her two legs flutter. Her bark is 'Hey, hey, hey.' When she tugs to chase a cat in the park, husband Greg holds her leash taut and she seems ready to fly. On her knees - she is a dog! -- she bows to wife Kate (Julie White) who does not want an animal in the house. All four actors bring total affection for their characters. Matthew Broderick's deadpan delivery of ridiculous lines - 'Can I play?' he asks when Sylvia and Kate are looking for something on the floor - is droll. Julie White as the wife who wants both her new career and to maintain her marriage makes it real, even the odd mid-play song 'Every Time We Say Good-by,' when Sylvia and Greg, in separate locations, sing singly, then together as a love

duet. Finally Kate, at the airport ready to depart for London, makes it an unexpected threesome. Robert Sella in each of his three supporting roles is delicious. He plays the macho Bowser's owner, a dog we meet vividly in our imaginations. Bowser's owner is continually reading theories about human-animal relationships, which adds a needed edge to the sentiment. (Kate quotes from Shakespeare at apt moments.) Sella is over-the-top comedy as Phyllis, Kate's philanthropic friend who is totally nonplussed by Sylvia's antics. Leslie, the family therapist, is deliberately ambiguous in dress and gesture. Leslie says it's a therapeutic approach: the patients can decide his/her gender.

The revival of *Old Times* (1971) by Nobel Laureate Harold Pinter at the American Airlines Theatre received mixed, even lukewarm reviews when it deserves much better. It's an exploration of memory, longing, and fear. Director Douglas Hodge brought a deep understanding of the dynamics - especially Deeley's (Clive Owen in a welcome Broadway debut) confusion - although he might have paid more attention to the many ironies. Anna has decided pay Kate and her husband a visit in a remote seaside area. The women were best friends and roommates 20 years ago in London. Awkwardness, intensified by Kate's curious lack of interest, leads Deeley and Anna to swap lines from old songs. ('I get no kick from champagne, mere alcohol ...' 'You're lovely to look at ...,' 'Blue Moon, I saw you standing alone ...,' etc.) As they sing, they begin to court each other. Anna postures seductively. Deeley, who began in an easy chair, paces like a cat. There is no intermission but Pinter has a second act, which Hodge understaged. Katie competes with Anna but leaving to take a bath. Songs snippets are now used to court Anna as the dynamic shifts. Deeley turns hostile. He is even more torn with longing - and fearful of Kate's sensuality. As they each try to remember a shared, vague past the stage crackles with tension. 'There are some things one remembers even

though they may never have happened,' Kate observes. The play closes with each of the women reclining on a divan and Deeley in his easy chair, perhaps crying. The wonder of the script is how the present becomes a distorted mirror of their long ago triangle. Clive Owen, Eve Best and Kelly Reilly bring strong, charismatic performances, but they must battle the mysterious, distracting set by Christine Jones.

Senior citizens on stage used to be either funny or pathetic. In the revival of *The Gin Game* (1976 Pulitzer Prize), a two-hander by Donald L. Coburn at the John Golden Theatre, Cicely Tyson and James Earl Jones, who play Fonsia Dorsey and Weller Martin, nursing home residents, are feisty, challenging, eager for diversion, jealous, vain, and affectionate - the full range of interesting human emotions. Leonard Foglia directs the nuances, the human reactions rather than just going for the big emotions so that the whole moves with lightness and unpredictability. Of course Weller explodes after a string of unbroken gin game wins by Fonsia, and it is frightening, but it's part of a whole. Riccardo Hernandez's set, the back porch of the home, is littered with old walkers and wheelchairs, a metaphor for the discarded people like Fonsia, who finds walking a challenge, but who is still very much alive.

BROADWAY LISTINGS

Aladdin, New Amsterdam Theatre; *Allegiance*, Longacre; *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; *Fun Home*, Circle in the Square; *Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder*, Walter Kerr; *The Gin Game*, John Golden; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Hand to God*, Booth; *The Illusionists*, Neil Simon; *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; *Lord of the Dance: Dangerous Games*, Lyric; *Matilda the Musical*, Shubert; *Misery*, Broadhurst; *Noises Off*, American Airlines; *On Your Feet*, Marquis; *Our Mother's Brief Affair*, Samuel J. Friedman; *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.



Keira Knightley making her Broadway debut in the title-role of Helen Edmundson's adaptation of Zola's *Thérèse Raquin*, directed by Evan Cabnet. Photo: Joan Marcus.



Harold Pinter's 1971 play, *Old Times*, revived at American Airlines Theatre by Douglas Hodge with Clive Owen, Eve Best and Kelly Reilly. Photo: Joan Marcus.