

PLAYS

INTERNATIONAL & EUROPE



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Features



Johan Persson in his Arch1 Photography Studio in Hackney, London.
Photo: David Best

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Johan Persson: An Interview

For fifteen years, the London-based theatre and dance photographer Johan Persson has captured the emotional core of a great number of outstanding London productions. Interviewed by Dana Rufolo.

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Performing botanical scenes from Shakespeare in his very own garden

Actor Mace Perlman describes in glowing detail what it was like to perform Shakespeare in Stratford-upon-Avon using a performance script written by Margaret Rose and initially staged in the region of Milan, Italy.

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Gilberta Crispino and Mace Perlman as Juliet and Romeo encounter the dawn during A Walk in Shakespeare's Garden in Stratford-upon-Avon. Photo: Elena Savino.

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Jeremy Irons and Lesley Manville as James and Mary Tyrone in *Long Day's Journey into Night* by Eugene O'Neill at London's Wyndham's Theatre directed by Richard Eyre. Photo: Hugo Glendinning. Read the review on page 18.

Glenda Frank in New York

What kind of stories do theatre artists choose to dramatize: stories about themselves or about the world? When dramas are self-revelation, a window into personal passions, they sometimes transcend the narrative, moving us, the audience into keener self-recognition, changing us emotionally. This is so with Eve Ensler's *In the Body of the World*, directed by the incomparable Diane Paulus who is equally at home in the world of Cirque du Soleil, Broadway, and opera. It is a magnificent creation which is intensely personal, as well as fierce and funny.

Ensler has long been a righteous warrior, angry in *The Vagina Monologues* about the invisibility of women. ("I was worried about vaginas. I was worried about what we think about vaginas, and even more worried that we don't think about them... So I decided to talk to women about their vaginas"). In this new solo piece off-Broadway at Manhattan Theatre Club, she is outraged by her own metastasized cancer. As well, she is outraged by the rape and subsequent rejection of women and girls in the Congo. After being diagnosed, she linked the two. Women, forced into exile from their bodies, must create a new place for themselves.

Does this sound like a diatribe? Far from it. Remember *Wit*, Margaret Edson's drama about a college teacher struggling with invasive cancer? This is more powerful – and more empowering – because the patient, Ensler, is on stage vibrantly alive, proving that the victim of larger-than-life monsters (disease and war) can be the victor. "It is when we don't live that the dying comes," she observes. Facts slide easily into metaphors. She recognizes the dark inflammation on a scan of her body because she has seen images of the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. The Congolese soldiers' "multiple violations of women, causing leaking fistulas, is the rape of the earth itself". Although she wears the typical New York black, her couch, the carpet, the Asian cabinets behind her, and her scarf are red, the Chinese colour of success (set and costume by Myung Hee Cho).

The monologue is divided into three sections: Somnolence (what she calls "knowing but refusing to know"), Burning (chemotherapy), and Second Wind. Her journey begins in 2010. She is in the Congo, working to establish The City of Joy, a healing centre for women (and their children) damaged by war. She finds a suspicious lump. The diagnosis and treatment are horrifying, not just Stage IV but the necessary removal of many organs, including her colon. Her narrative touches familiar bases – hair loss, nausea, depression – but she emphasizes the traveller's need for reaffirmation. One surgeon walked around the table to look her in the eye and say "Eve, I know your work with women. You are going to get well". (Later he donated time and medical supplies to The City of Joy, now in its sixth year.) She remembers the nurse who touched her hand; the large "Fart Volunteer" who helped her understand her reconstructed body;

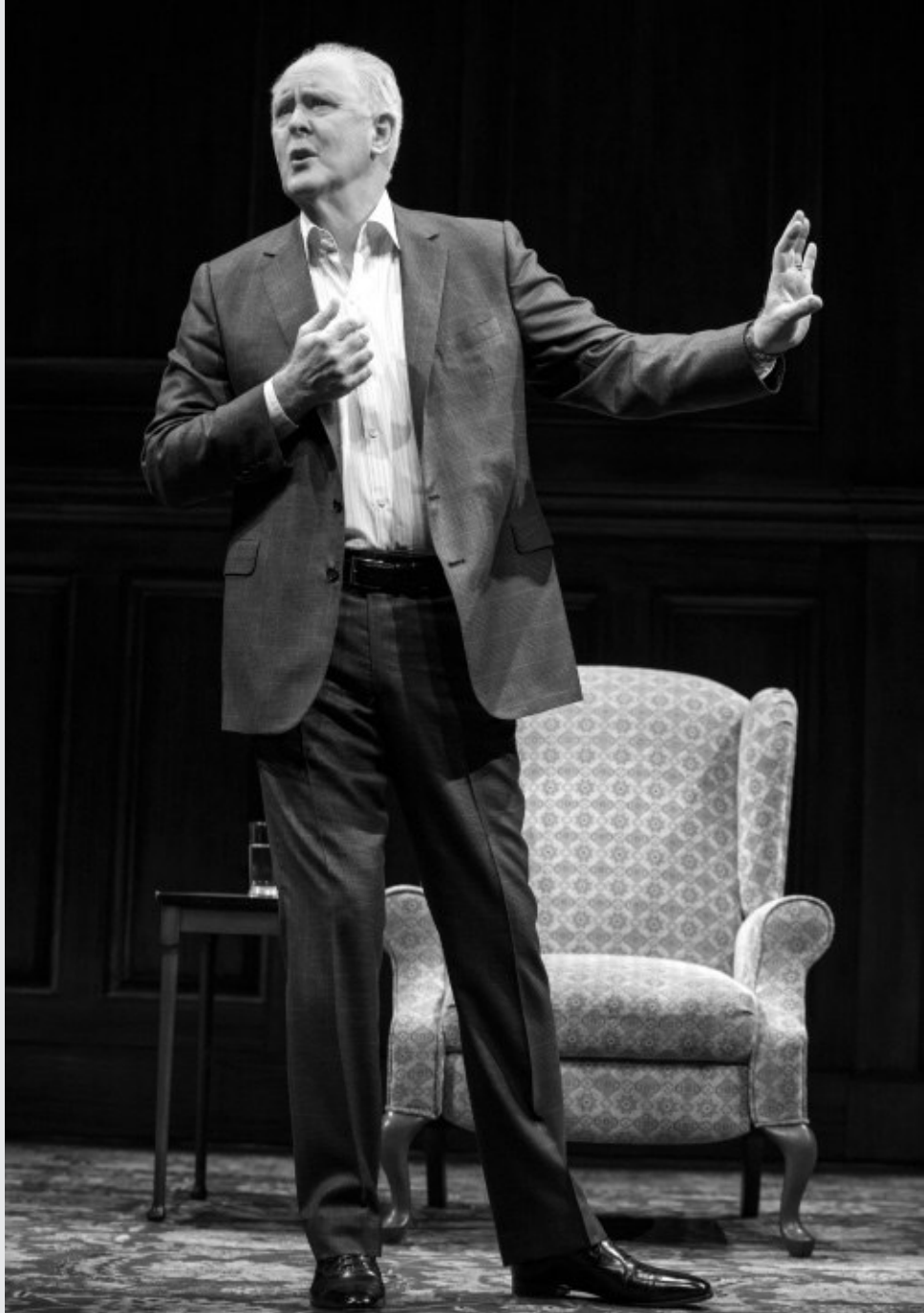
her friends who threw an Indian fiesta in her hospital room; her sister, a life-long rival, who never left her side; the counsellor who tells a terrified patient that chemotherapy is her battalion in the war. Not an invasion! And the women in the Congo, whom she spoke with almost daily, continue to plan The City of Hope. (The physician who shoots a needle painfully deep into a wound and says nothing to her is simply a contrast, and she seeks treatment at another hospital.)

In the Body of the World is a mix: tales of her treatment segue into struggles to complete the project, true grit and self-pity teeter, the personal and a recognition of the suffering of the others balance. In the hospital she is too weak to read or talk, so she stares at a tree outside her window. One day she notices the bark. The next day, the branches; another, the leaves. Peacefulness and focus revive her will to survive. She, a privileged Westerner, and the African women who are often poor and outcast, become sisters in a common struggle with their wounded bodies. (The dominant projection is a lush green jungle.) She makes us her friends. Twice she asks the

audience to rise and dance to celebrate being here, still being here.

and thousands of other fans have admired actor John Lithgow for decades. His *Stories by Heart*, directed by Daniel Sullivan at the American Airlines Theatre, is a one-man tribute to his father, a peripatetic dreamer who co-founded the Great Lakes Festival and the Antioch Shakespeare Festival in Ohio while relocating his family to escape debt collectors. (Eventually he became the Artistic Director of the McCarter Theatre at Princeton University.) In Act One, John Lithgow is a boy listening to his father read and perform bedtime stories. Acting all the roles, even the electric clippers and scissors, Lithgow recites to us *Haircut*, a 1925 Ring Lardner story about a popular bully, a misogynist, and a practical joker who goes one prank too far. By untucking his shirt, Lithgow becomes the garrulous barber. His speech changes when he is the boy with a head injury and changes again when he is the doctor. A cast of characters inhabit the imaginary barbershop.

In Act Two, Lithgow's parents are aging, and



John Lithgow in *Stories By Heart*. Photo: Joan Marcus.



Eve Ensler in *In the Body of the World*. Photo: Joan Marcus.

his once indomitable father is failing. Lithgow moves in with them and tries almost everything to revive him, without success until he realizes he could now tell stories to his father. *Uncle Fred Flits By*, P. G. Wodehouse's tale of an incorrigible old man and his mortified nephew, is a comic delight. Lithgow here is at his best, every limb of his large frame engaged in performance – his voice, eyes, and shoulders all part of the drama. And his apathetic father laughs and rallies. It was a tender performance about fathers and sons transforming each other.

Last but far from least in my report is the play by Martin McDonagh, *Hangmen*. It is in a sold-out run at the off-Broadway Atlantic Theatre Company, directed by Matthew Dunster and is slated to open on Broadway at the Cort Theatre in April. *Hangmen* is a 2015 British prize-winning import that also played to packed houses at London's Royal Court and National theatres. *Three Billboards outside Ebbing, Missouri* won McDonagh a Best Screenplay award at the Golden Globes and has been nominated for seven Oscars.

It has been a pleasure to see how McDonagh's talent has matured in this highly charged, off-beat dark comedy that subtly addresses questions about men who are paid to kill, righteous murder, guilt, and innocence – questions that spring from the conflicts but never slow the comedy. In Act One he channels an ominous, Pinteresque character, but by Act Two McDonagh has made him and the play

uniquely his own. The second-best hangman in England who runs a pub now that hanging has been abolished is not a likeable character. But he and the other unpalatable characters have surprising poignancy. Even the mysterious antagonist evokes pity.

The play revolves around a self-appointed autocrat (the totally persuasive Mark Addy as the hangman), his comic chorus of alcoholic admirers, his gin-swilling wife (Sally Rogers), and his adolescent daughter Shirley (Gaby French). Mooney (Johnny Flynn), the menacing young man, suddenly appears on the second anniversary of the death of Hennessy (Gilles Geary), a prisoner hanged in the opening scene who protested his innocence to the end. We learn a girl had been killed on the first anniversary of the hanging. We watch Mooney sidle up to Shirley, who agrees to meet him and then disappears.

Director Matthew Dunster, ever attentive to details, keeps up a lively pace. He and the playwright have woven a shifting balance of fear, revelation, and comedy seamlessly until the outrageous close. You couldn't ask for better ensemble work. Designer Anna Fleischle's fluid staging and opaque windows (full of shadows and menacing faces) were integral to the dramatic action. (Fleischle is also a winner with her Olivier, Critics' Circle, and Evening Standard awards for best design.)

Tweet Glenda Frank on @PIEurope

BROADWAY LISTINGS

Aladdin, New Amsterdam; *Anastasia*, Broadhurst; *Angels in America*, Neil Simon; *The Band's Visit*, Ethel Barrymore; *Beautiful: Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *The Boys in the Band*, Booth; *A Bronx Tale: The Musical*, Longacre; *Carousel*, Imperial; *Chicago: the Musical*, Ambassador; *Children of a Lesser God*, Studio 54; *Come from Away*, Schoenfeld; *Dear Evan Hansen*, The Music Box; *Escape to Margaritaville*, Marquis; *Frozen*, St. James; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*, Lyric; *Hello Dolly*, Shubert; *The Iceman Cometh*, Bernard B. Jacobs; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *Lobby Hero*, Helen Hayes; *Mean Girls*, August Wilson; *My Fair Lady*, Vivian Beaumont; *Once on this Island*, Circle in the Square; *The Parisian Woman*, Hudson; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *The Play that Goes Wrong*, Lyceum; *Rocktopia*, Broadway; *Saint Joan*, Samuel J. Friedman; *School of Rock*, Winter Garden; *SpongeBob SquarePants*, Palace; *Springsteen on Broadway*, Walter Kerr; *Summer: The Donna Summer Musical*, Lunt-Fontanne; *Three Tall Women*, Golden; *Travesties*, American Airline; *Waitress*, Brooks Atkinson; *Wicked*, Gershwin.