

# Glenda Frank in New York

There is an impetus to promote visibility for women in New York theatre. More new female playwrights and directors are appearing off- and off-off Broadway. Although the best feminist or woman-centred productions this winter have familiar names, the ones chosen reference empowerment (or its lack).

Director Phyllida Lloyd, known for her 2016 all-female *The Taming of the Shrew*, has fashioned a *Tempest* that is brilliant, high energy, and also a gloss of our time. As with the other plays in her trilogy that includes *Julius Caesar* and *Henry IV* in previous seasons at St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn, the all-female cast is intended to represent tough prison inmates. They file through the lobby before the doors open. We hear cell doors clank, buzzers sound (Pete Malkin is the sound designer), and a loud rollcall on the arena stage while guards flank the audience at the top of the bleacher seats. This immersive experience continues in various degrees throughout.

Actress Harriet Walker plays both prisoner Hannah who has served 35 years of a life sentence and Hannah in the role of Prospero.

Set on a basketball court, the design by Bunny Christie is minimal. The costumes designed by Chloe Lamford are in shades of grey. The actors are totally engaged in their roles, and the line readings are as lucid as though we all speak blank verse. Performance trumps gender and appearance through the magic of transformation. The script has been cut and yet Prospero's lines and the scene between Miranda and Ferdinand have been sufficiently untouched so that there is time to allow emotions to unfold. The actors create distinctive personalities and accents. Caliban (Sophie Stanton) is a homeless man who trails garbage; his crime was a sexual attack on a younger Miranda (Leah Harvey), which he attempts to repeat as we watch. The encounter between Stefano, Caliban, and Trinculo (played by a charismatic Karen Dunbar) is effortlessly comical; there is neither artifice nor panning. As a wannabe king, Stefano (Jackie Clune) wears a paper crown from McDonald's; his sceptre is a toilet plunger.

Yes, this is Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, but it is also remembering *The Tempest* with the dramatic moments caught in flashes of lightning. There is a depth and passion to the production that comes only from a director's long and loving relationship with a work of art. The inspired modern touches spring from insight. Ariel (Jade Anouka) is magical and a quick costume changer. She uses chloroform on a white handkerchief, not a spell, to put the men of the court to sleep. Ferdinand (Sheila Atim) must clean up garbage, not chop wood, and you can feel his dismay as Miranda helps. Prospero, ever protective, watches from a referee chair at the top of the bleachers. The scene is light and playful, but when Miranda offers to serve Ferdinand, Prospero raises his hands in dismay. They marry in matching bowler hats and skirts, two brides. Giant white balloons, on which images designed by Duncan McLean are projected, tumble from above. Prospero closes the play by popping them.

Lloyd believes that when Shakespeare's plays are performed by a single gender, "their veins become clearer". After reaching a certain age, women have fewer roles, Walker observed. "I felt that I was at the top of my game – yet at that point was going to have to abandon the sport". The audience for *The Tempest* sat for an hour and forty-five minutes without an intermission and was grateful that Walker and Lloyd are still in the game.

Twenty-two years ago Glenn Close won a Tony and Drama Desk award for her breath-stopping Norma Desmond in Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Sunset Boulevard* with Don Black's and Christopher Hampton's book and lyrics. This new production, directed by Lonny Price and played at the Palace Theatre, is also moving, if different. The opulent set and costumes have been minimalized, freeing us to focus on the characters and the music. Norma Desmond's spirit towers even as Close's physical frame seems small and fragile. She can't hit all of the notes, is even off-key, but that somehow makes Desmond even more tragic. The actor has always known how to inject a glitter of classical acting

into a role. Psychological explanations and dramaturgical problems are irrelevant. A deposed queen longs for return to her rightful throne. The enemy is time and technology. Like Joe Gillis, her lover, we feel pity and fear. In the closing scenes, she recognizes the impossibility of a comeback and ages a decade. It is an artistic triumph. Frail and majestic at once, she shoots her departing lover in a final gesture of grandeur, before dissolving into madness.

Fred Johanson as Max von Mayerling, her factotum, greatest fan, and ex-husband, has a rich baritone that is as seductive as the score, allowing me no critical distance. The large onstage orchestra is conducted by Kristen Blodgett. Michael Xavier and Siobhan Dillon as the attractive young hopefuls have beautiful, trained voices.

Downtown at the Performing Garage, the legendary Wooster Group is offering a bolder feminist statement by adapting the 1979 documentary film *Town Bloody Hall* by Chris Hegedus and D.A. Pennebaker into *The Town Hall Affair*, directed by Elizabeth LeCompte. The original Town Hall panel of 1971 was organized by the American writer Norman Mailer in response to Kate Millett's *Sexual Politics*. It included on its panel the British feminist Germaine Greer, author of *The Female Eunuch*, as well as the American feminist Jill Johnston, author of the 1973 book *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution*, Diana Trilling, whom Miller called America's "leading literary lady-critic"; and Jacqueline Ceballos from NOW (the National Organization for Women). Millett declined to participate.

Contemporary reviews of the Town Hall panel focused on the classically beautiful Germaine Greer and the misogynistic Norman Mailer. However, *The Town Hall Affair* by the Wooster Group recognized something that was overlooked in the 1970s. They spotlight Jill Johnston, played by Kate Valk. Before the panel begins, she announces that she is launching her career as a boxer, a metaphor for a feminist warrior. Later we see her wearing only one glove. Mailer shut her down after her fifteen minutes were up and declared that feminists have no

sense of humour, dismissed her, her mockery, and her deliberately disruptive agenda.

A clip of the 1979 documentary film runs behind the actors; they mouth the original words. Why? Because these positions have changed little in forty years. Johnston kisses Greer (Maura Tierney) when she joins the panellists (late) and Greer plays along, but Greer also responds when Mailer, sometimes at his most chauvinistic, flirts. Johnston proclaims her vision of a utopia as a lesbian nation (as a metaphor?) where women support and love each other. She does not want a scholarly or rational discussion, especially the Freudian approach posited by Trilling about a woman's orgasm. Trilling is played by Greg Mehrten, perhaps to highlight her male stance. Scott Shepherd and Ari Fliakos play Norman Mailer simultaneously, his presence having twice the power and voice.

The Wooster Group derived "pleasure" in giving Johnston the final word. She is the visionary who believed that women should resist, fight, and defend one another. *The Town Hall Affair* may not always work as theatre-in-the-moment, but it is conceptually brilliant. Performances in San Francisco and Los Angeles are scheduled for March and April.

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Glenn Close and Michael Xavier in *Sunset Boulevard*. Photo: Joan-Marcus.

## BROADWAY LISTINGS

*Aladdin*, New Amsterdam; *Amélie*, A New Musical, Walter Kerr; *August Wilson's Jitney*, Samuel J. Friedman; *Bandstand*, Bernard B. Jacobs; *Carole King Musical*, Stephen Sondheim; *The Book of Mormon*, Eugene O'Neill; *A Bronx Tale – The Musical*, Longacre; *Cats*, Neil Simon; *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*, Lunt-Fontanne; *Chicago*

*the Musical*, Ambassador; *Cirque du Soleil, Paramour*, Lyric; *Come from Away*, Schoenfeld; *Dear Evan Hansen*, The Music Box; *A Doll's House, Part 2*, John Golden; *The Glass Menagerie*, Belasco; *The Great Comet*, Imperial; *Groundhog Day the Musical*, August Wilson; *Hamilton*, Richard Rodgers; *Hello Dolly*, Shubert; *In Transit*, Circle in

the Square; *Indecent*, Cort; *Kinky Boots*, Al Hirschfeld; *The Lion King*, Minskoff; *The Little Foxes*, Samuel J. Friedman; *Miss Saigon*, Broadway; *On Your Feet*, Marquis; *Oslo*, Vivian Beaumont; *The Phantom of the Opera*, Majestic; *The Play that Goes Wrong*, Lyceum; *The Present*, Ethel Barrymore; *Present Laughter*, St. James; *The Price*, American

Airlines; *School of Rock*, Winter Garden; *Significant Other*, Booth; *Six Degrees of Separation*, Ethel Barrymore; *Sunday in the Park with George*, Hudson; *Sunset Boulevard*, Palace; *Sweat*, Studio 54; *Waitress*, Brooks Atkinson; *Warpaint*, Nederlander; *Wicked*, Gershwin.

Jade Anouka in *The Tempest* at St. Ann's Warehouse. Photo: Teddy Wolff.

