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Theater: Not-So "Dead Poets Society," Lavish "Great Comet"

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DEAD POETS SOCIETY ** 1/2 out of ****

NATASHA, PIERRE & THE GREAT COMET OF 1812 *** out of **** (but ** 1/2 if you've seen it before)

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CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

At first, I was under the impression that the marvelous director John Doyle was helming a musical version of the film *Dead Poets Society* to mark his beginning as the new artistic director of Classic Stage Company. Well, I was half right. This is a straight play adaptation of the film (though a little singing and humming is present), not a musical. But director John Doyle *is* marvelous: it's a treat to see anything he does and the fluid, natural, seemingly effortless presentation on display here is no exception.

The movie *Dead Poets Society* is in the grand tradition of sentimental odes to inspiring teachers. Ironically, Robin Williams as the teacher was by far the best remembered and least effective element of the movie. He spouted off comic riffs in an anachronistic and distracting style when not seeming tamed — Williams wasn't so much restrained by director Peter Weir as constrained. The movie was on firmer ground when focusing on the students, thanks especially to an excellent ensemble led by Robert Sean Leonard as a boy yearning to act but fearing his abusively controlling father and Ethan Hawker as a stutterer essentially ignored by his. (Here's my original review.)

Turning it into a stage play has promise: excise most of the annoying quirks of Williams' improv, stay more completely with the students and you might just have yourself a solid, sentimental tear-jerker. That's precisely what Tom Schulman has done when adapting his own screenplay. The show is a tight ninety minutes and cleverly presented on a mostly bare stage with stacks of books moved here and there to serve as seats, desks and so on. Unfortunately, poor casting in two main roles mar the work and other productions — which will surely follow — can take care of that. (To really improve the work, you'd have to dramatically rethink it for the stage and I doubt Schulman would be the one for that.)

John Keating (Jason Sudeikis of *SNL*) is the new English teacher at a strict and august New England all-male prep school in 1959. An alumnus, he shocks and delights the teenage boys in his class by mocking a dull introduction in their textbook, encouraging them to rip it out, and generally urging them to seize life before life slips them by. The head of the school (played with no-nonsense aplomb by David Garrison) is not amused, but neither is he dictatorially incensed. He allows Keating a little free rein albeit with ample warning about not encouraging lads destined for boring jobs in business to hope for more.

The students of course eat it up. Neil (Thomas Mann) decides to defy his dad and act in the school play, nervous Todd (Zane Pais) starts writing poetry and losing his stutter, Knox (William Hochman) overcomes his fears to woo the local girl of his dreams and so on.

All well and good. Doyle's elegantly direct presentation is (almost) faultless, from Scott Pask's effective set design (including shelves and shelves of texts along the wall and those stacks of books), Japhy Weideman's subtle lighting to Matt Stine's quietly wonderful sound design. Rudely, I give Ann Hould-Ward no special credit for the costume design of prep school clothes because this cast would look great in damn near anything.

So what's the problem? Schulman's script is a little too streamlined, for one: I wanted or needed more about the burgeoning friendship between Neil and Todd, which is the heart of the film. More problematic is the casting of Mann and Stephen Barker Turner as his father. Turner is just a stock villain here, though to be fair the role is very one-note as written. (Kurtwood Smith is just as hiss-able in the film but somehow I think the

intimacy of film allowed him to be hatefully cruel in a quieter, more believable key.)

Mann is simply miscast. He would be perfectly good in several other roles, but he doesn't have the tremulous, vulnerable, teetering on the edge of despair vulnerability that Robert Sean Leonard captured so well in the film.

SPOILER ALERT IF YOU HAVEN'T SEEN FILM

Neil commits suicide at the end of the play and if you question that, the whole sad, sentimental tragedy falls apart. Mann comes across as a perfectly likable kid but suicidal? Not even close. He might get too drunk and throw up; he might crash the family car; but suicidal he is not. He is supposed to burn for the theater and in the film you don't doubt he could be a great actor: Leonard delivers Puck from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with magical intensity. You know, without a doubt, this kid was born to be onstage. Mann wisely doesn't ape Leonard's take on the part but it seems like a lark; he tosses off the role of Puck with enthusiasm, the sort of crowd-pleasing performance the quarterback might deliver and surprise and delight everyone with (hey, he's not bad!). But it is not shocking in its greatness. It's a valid choice, but one which further undercuts the character's aching need.

Further, Leonard brought a low-key tension of sexuality to his part and thus the hero worship of his roommate Todd. (Or maybe it's just me.) Rarely has a film so glamorized teen suicide, but that's stock in trade for these sorts of stories. (*A Separate Peace*, etc.) In perhaps the one major gaffe by Doyle, he shows Mann dying to the sound of a gunshot: we hear the gunshot and Mann floats backward dramatically. It's beautiful but he's not even holding a gun — heck, anyone who hasn't seen the film might even wonder exactly what happened. Perhaps it was meant to symbolically suggest Neil's dad had killed him in spirit though Neil himself pulled the trigger? In any case, it only underlines our surprise and disbelief that this actor in this role would take his own life.

In contrast, Pais seems a little *too* on edge as Todd — if anyone needs a suicide watch, it's him. But he's a lot more in tune with the desperate stakes of the story, at least to the kids involved. Bubba Weiler is an especially handsome nerdy Meeks (no wonder Keating gives him a wolf whistle when they first come face to face) but he and the other actors embody their roles well, with special kudos to Hochman as the lovelorn Knox. Sudeikis is very appealing as Keating and frankly I'd even remove the last remaining vestiges of the film performance by Williams, namely the scene where he imitates how his students marched around the classroom. It's a finely judged turn. As it stands, this is an enjoyable tear-jerker, intelligently presented by Doyle and CSC as one has come to expect from both of them. A crop of talented young actors, a dramatic role for a man known mostly for comedy and a chance to pat ourselves on the back for our knowledge of Walt Whitman and a smattering of Latin. Not bad, though I still wouldn't mind seeing it turned into a musical.

NATASHA, PIERRE & THE GREAT COMET OF 1812 *** out of **** (but ** 1/2 if you've seen it before)

IMPERIAL THEATRE

First the good news: if you haven't seen the Ars Nova production of the musical *Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812*, it looks more lavish and fun than ever ensconced at the Imperial Theatre on Broadway. I happily recommend newcomers checking it out because creator David Malloy is the real deal. This musical spin on a section of Tolstoy's *War & Peace* is his baby from start to finish: he wrote the book, the music, the lyrics and did the orchestration. Since seeing it in the meatpacking district (my original review is [here](#)), I saw Malloy's song cycle *Ghost Quartet* and that had a superior set of songs with better melodies. He's getting better and that's exciting.

Famously environmental, *The Great Comet* has always enjoyed a fanciful staging, with Russian treats tossed out to the crowd, vodka shots on tap, ramps and stairs threading through the audience so the actors can be anywhere and everywhere, forcing audience members to happily rotate this way and that to see who is where. This treat is magnified on Broadway where Mimi Lien's scenic design runs gloriously riot.

Seats throughout the orchestra are replaced by small tables and lamps, red velvet is everywhere, ramps curve this way and that for performers to roam about, sweeping stairways lead up to the mezzanine and the stage has been replaced by a multi-level set that includes hundreds of audience members seated at small tables, a bar or in stadium seats facing out to the rest of the crowd. Artwork and Russian Orthodox crosses (among many other items) line the walls everywhere you turn. You see much of it up close, so I can attest that the costumes by Paloma Young are impeccable down to the smallest detail. Indeed all the tech elements are excellent and I can't even imagine the challenge Nicholas Pope faced in creating a sound design that would work flawlessly and make sense of actors swirling about into virtually every corner of the theater. Similar kudos to the inventive choreography of Sam Pinkleton and the work of director Rachel Chavkin — endless possibilities also equal endless opportunities for crossed-wires and mishaps but none occur here.

It's eye-popping and — more importantly — it's not just fancy flourishes. With much of the action taking place higher up, I believe the seats in the mezzanine are actually closer to the performers most of the time than usual. Ditto the hundreds of people seated among the orchestra and main stage areas. Ninety percent of the time, you've got good sight lines and the other ten percent of the time it's a good excuse to take a close-up look at one of the many attractive chorus members probably standing a few feet away from you.

The show arrived with huge critical acclaim but it is presumably singer Josh Groban making his Broadway debut that has goosed the box office from the very first preview. He was out sick the night I attended and Scott Stangland played the part. Creator Malloy originated the role and Stangland is very much in that mold: one can imagine Groban soaring to the heavens and turning every note into a prayer and I hope to see him in it. But Stangland captures the broken down nature of Pierre very well. Anyone other than devoted Grobaniacs won't feel cheated. So if it's your first time, by all means have fun.

However, if you've already seen *The Great Comet*, a second viewing is not to the show's benefit. Malloy ably tackles the romantic drama of a section of Tolstoy but seems overwhelmed. Song after song is not so much a song as it is a lengthy and elaborate bit of exposition posing as a song. It's amusing in the opening number when the cast tells you the show is based on a really long Russian novel and you should feel free to check out the summary and family tree in your Playbill for help. Even better, Malloy employs a clever scheme a la "The Twelve Days Of Christmas" where he repeats who each character is while adding a new one to the list on every new line. By the end of the opener you've been told ten or so times that Anatole is hot and this one's a slut and that one is kind and so on. It's not that hard to keep track of them after that.

Unfortunately, spelling out who is doing what is Malloy's fallback in scene after scene. When an honest to goodness song comes around, it feels as rare and welcome an event as the return of the great comet Pierre sees at the end of the show. "Charming" in act one is a breath of fresh air and the gorgeous "Sonya Alone" remains the highlight of the entire evening. (Brittain Ashford originated the role of Sonya and sings in a very distinct style that is almost shockingly out of place here. Really, I don't know what Joni Mitchell's more soulful cousin is doing in Russia but who cares? She's great.)

Other than those few exceptions, it's almost entirely a case of song after song in which characters spell out what they're thinking and doing, from blushing to pacing to putting on their coat. The bizarre act two rouser is an elaborate ten minute (or so) number celebrating a drunken sleigh driver. Why should this be such a major part of the story in musical terms? Well, it shouldn't, but as with everything on display, it's fun, to be sure. Just not so fun on a second viewing.

I haven't described the story because really, it's not that complicated. A young woman comes to Moscow, already betrothed to her beloved, who is off at war. Natasha is her name and Denée Benton is quite delightful and the best reason to check this edition out. Natasha is soon wooed by the cad Anatole (Lucas Steele), who is married, a fact known to almost no one but his close friends. It's a Russian novel we're talking about so

things do not turn out well for Natasha or Anatole or her once-beloved or even the studious Pierre, who watches on balefully and is entranced by the young lady in her despair before finding spiritual solace in that comet streaking across the sky.

Steele is indeed pretty and he continues to deliver the one-note caricature of a performance he's been asked to since the beginning. I think a more realistic performance would elevate the tragedy and cruelty on display. When Steele eventually moves on, they might well consider Constantine Maroulis, who could nail the rock-ish high notes easily and with encouragement go for something more subtle.

That said, everyone is performing in the high spirits of the evening, with Grace McLean for example having a lot of fun as the emphatic hostess Marya D, but without teetering into tediousness. Go up and down the cast list and you can say the same — good work done by all. I'm not sure where Malloy's protean talents will lead him, but I do suspect he's more off beat than this hit might indicate, more BAM than Broadway. I do know I'm eager to see what he does next.

(Oh and the novel is damn good, too. Make sure you read the recent translation by Pevear and Volokhonsky.)

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***

Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2

Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2

Skeleton Crew ***

Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before

The Grand Paradise ***

Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2

Something Rotten ***

Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2

Broadway & The Bard * 1/2

Prodigal Son **

A Bronx Tale: The Musical **

Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **

Nice Fish ***

Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***

Hughie **

Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2

Straight ** 1/2

Eclipsed ***

Red Speedo ***

The Royale ** 1/2

Boy ****

The Robber Bridegroom ***

Hold On To Me, Darling ***

Blackbird ** 1/2

Disaster! *

The Effect ** 1/2

Dry Powder ** 1/2

Head Of Passes ** 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2

The Crucible (w Ben Whishaw) ***

Bright Star **

She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ***

Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2

RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ***

RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2

Nathan The Wise ** 1/2

The Father **

American Psycho **

Waitress ** 1/2

Fully Committed ** 1/2

Long Day's Journey Into Night ***

A Streetcar Named Desire (w Gillian Anderson) ***

Tuck Everlasting **

War **

Paramour * 1/2

Troilus & Cressida (Shakespeare in the Park) ** 1/2

Cats (on Broadway, 2016 revival) **

The Encounter (Complicite on Broadway) **

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (at Two River Theater) ***

Oh, Hello ** 1/2

Heisenberg ** 1/2

The Dudleys ** 1/2

Holiday Inn * 1/2

A Life ** 1/2

Love Love Love ** 1/2

The Radicalization Of Rolfe (FringeFest NYC) ** 1/2

Sweat * 1/2

The Death of The Last Black Man In The Whole Entire World aka The Negro Book Of The Dead ***

Falsettos **

Dead Poets Society ** 1/2

Natasha, Pierre & The Great Comet of 1812 *** (but ** 1/2 if you've seen it before)

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.