

The Lifespan of a Play About Facts

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09.25.18

In our current political atmosphere of post-truths and fifteen-minute fake news cycles, art is now more than ever expected to deliver institution-bolstering resistance to the blatantly authoritarian rhetoric coming out of our divided nation's highest offices. Every new cultural product must be judged accordingly: to what extent a piece of entertainment, well, *entertains*, seems to no longer be as important as whether or not it comforts or disturbs appropriately. For instance: Steven Spielberg's *The Post* gets a 4/10 for its being a dull, endless movie about documents but gets a 10/10 for its timely reminder of the power of investigative journalism in confronting corruption and conspiracy; tweet your ticket stub and get a pat on the back from the #Resistance.

The newest Broadway play on this chopping block is *The Lifespan of a Fact*, still in previews but set to debut at Studio 54 on October 18th. The show — directed by Tony nominee Leigh Silverman — is based on the story that grew out of an annotated essay of the same name, written by John D'Agata and Jim Fingal, essayist, and fact-checker of the essayist respectively. Try to follow: this play is based on or about several layers of subjects, but it's very simple once the curtains open.

Fingal, portrayed by Daniel Radcliffe, is a prudent and ambitious — if not socially unaware — young intern at a prestigious publication, where the steadfast yet matronly editor, played by Cherry Jones, has assigned him an urgent fact-checking job: the magazine's next cover story, a grand and poetic essay about the suicide of a young man in Las Vegas. A snappy introduction sets up the simple twist that drives the rest of the show: the essayist D'Agata — portrayed with sympathetic, earned pretension by Bobby Canavale — has taken much artistic license with the details as they happened, and Fingal's fastidious fact-checking sends the trio into an editorial and epistemological crisis. Fingal oversteps as an intern by arguing with the publication's editor that it's not right to publish a story about a dead teenager that's misrepresented the facts surrounding his death. D'Agata says there may be some lies, but that he believes those lies help reveal

a more important poetic truth about the world than facts could ever do. He repeats what the dead teenager's mother told him, that the essay "*is her son.*"

The play is a tight 95 minutes, with much levity (even if many of the jokes are one-note) to keep its simple, singular thematic discussion palatable and never too painfully like an academic debate. Two minimal yet kinetic sets and some creative technical choices from Broadway's first all-female design team nicely serve the minimalist narrative, aided by dynamic direction that never lets one scene play out too long.

But does the binary argument between D'Agata and Fingal itself prove substantial fodder for a Broadway show in 2018? The current political climate may have dictated in art a mitigation of the non-political on behalf of taking some stake in a sociopolitically relevant sphere, but does *The Lifespan of a Fact* dig deep enough to hit at some deeper truth about our time? If not, does it serve as a more traditionally fulfilling narrative?

Hints are given about the greater forces at work in our characters to drive their arguments: Fingal, always prying for the facts, suspects and confronts his editor, asking if she's rooting for the essay's version of the truth because she has lost someone important and can't be objective due to her sympathy; and he pries at D'Agata's past, wondering if the writer's cynical reclusion is a defense mechanism to obscure how his disdain for raw fact is rooted in past traumas.

But these seeds of drives and desires in the characters never get a chance to grow, for the editor and D'Agata change the subject back to facts vs. truth. What their positions are remain clear, but there's never an understanding of *why* their positions are. Not much more than the first and last few sentences from D'Agata's essay are ever given, so the poetic truths he fights so hard for are never clear to us, even during the forty-eight seconds in which the audience must sit in silence, pondering them in the show's final moments.

It would make sense for *The Lifespan of a Fact* to conclude with a clear-cut political message, and to at least tidy itself up as a packaged product of these cultural times. I anticipated that by the end of the play our sensible editor character would shut down

Fingal and in one way or another preach to the audience in a stirring political gesture, upholding the importance of the facts while also insisting that a grand artistic truth certainly has a place — even in this confused time of echo-chambers and varying partisan realities — if it's attempting to overcome these modern barriers.

But no, the play opts for a cliffhanger ending as the editor mulls her decision as to the story's fate before deadline. The lights go out, and the audience is left with no answer to a hard question. An essay without conclusion. An ineffective statement piece, unless it's sneakily meant to serve as advertising for the book version of D'Agata's real story. There, maybe you'll find the thematic closure at which the play unrelentingly teases.