

THEATRE REVIEW

“STILL NOT”

@ *The Wow Café Theatre*

The 2016 New York International FRINGE Festival

Jacquelyn Claire – New York Theatre Guide



Harrison Bryan, STILL NOT

The 2016 FringeNYC Festival Presents *STILL NOT* written by Harrison Bryan. In this snapshot of stasis, we meet two people who are waiting. They are waiting for love, waiting for forgiveness and to atone, waiting for life to happen.

“This slice of life haiku play is a misty rainbow after the rain as viewed from a quiet, unassuming park bench.”

We meet “Her” (Shelby Hightower) who is sitting on a park bench and before long she is joined by “Him” (Harrison Bryan) who is pulled into her orbit. They create an exquisite first encounter filled with silence overpopulated with tension, stolen glances, and vulnerability. Before long they are wrapping each other up in the words of strangers desperately seeking points of connection.

What follows are six conversations over six days. With each conversation, they reveal more of themselves, their life circumstances and their views on relationships. There is a fragility in these exchanges that is like watching a plastic bag being blown on the wind, unable to land or find a still point. Our woman is almost glued to the bench in guilt and shame – unable to move past her own culpability in hurting another. Our man swirls around her, churning up the air trying to seduce her out of stubborn inertia. They both are seemingly incapable of moving powerfully forward in their lives. “HIM” is bound to the space as a historic, familiar geographic marker. He has always lived here. “HER” is bound to the spot as it is the marker of her pain. They are both waiting for someone else to get their lives going – a past love or a future one. Neither will be satisfied.

Harrison Bryan, as the playwright, has written a gentle conversation. He has a real gift of creating meaningful exchanges using realistic dialogue. I felt really comfortable with how these people were talking to each other; nothing felt forced. It feels as if these characters were created from extremely well observed real life interactions. There was an easy flow to the dialogue with gradual satisfying progressions. It was very meditative to watch and I had the urge to join in the chat. Bryan created well-rounded characters, very quickly, that were both likable and engaging. I think will develop into a great voice in the theater if he continues to hone his craft. But with dialogue this good, he will probably be snapped up for television series writing.

Rory Lance, the director, has done a beautiful job shaping each moment with care and precision. The “dance” of tension in the beginning was expertly done and he created a layered emotional world around this solitary park bench. I felt that he managed to get the maximum potential out of each performer by giving them polished, detailed blocking and inspired inner worlds that kept us interested throughout.

Shelby Hightower gave a feisty performance full of bravado, self-loathing, and brokenness. She was spellbinding considering that she never got out of her seat. Her visualization was powerful and she really pulled me into her world that was devolving and fragmenting around her. With this level of maturity in a young performer, I am sure she will not be bartending on the Upper East Side for long.

Harrison Bryan has created a lovable, charming, geeky misfit who is utterly entrancing. He inhabits the text like comfortable slippers and brings a quirky physicality to the role. He is truly endearing and you fear he could be the fly heading straight into the spider’s web. There is also a real, unjaded joy that seems to be coursing under his skin that illuminates his character’s expression.

The two actors worked perfectly together. There was great chemistry, believable discourse, shared moments of deep empathy and commitment to the text, to telling the story.

This is not a monumental life altering play but rather a declaration by two young performers that they are going to throw their hearts and souls into this profession and will carve out a permanent place for themselves in this industry. You can feel their optimism and youthful ambition pouring off the stage and I look forward to following their careers.

In their program notes, we see the Samuel Beckett quote, “...we spend our lives, it’s ours, trying to bring together in the same instant a ray of sunshine – and a free bench.” This slice of life, haiku play, is a misty rainbow after the rain as viewed from a quiet, unassuming, park bench.

Running Time: 1 hour and 15 minutes with no intermission.