

VOICE In Focus

- George Bush
- Iraq War
- Genocide
- Protests
- Spying
- 'Voice' 50th Anniversary

NYC Guide



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- best of nyc
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- drinks
- shopping
- film
- music
- home

voice columns:

-- select --

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Joe & Betty at Kirk Theater; *Gone Home* at Manhattan Theatre Club

by Charles McNulty
December 25 - 31, 2002

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As every adult boy and girl knows, the holidays mean domestic drama. Returning home for even the briefest of visits plunges you automatically into a role that's at once most familiar and most strange. For some the homecoming is a kind of sentimental melodrama, for others a surreal food farce. The long-distance version isn't any easier, with the famous soliloquy "To call or not to call" transforming in a tormented heartbeat from Shakespearean quandary to Artaudian theater of cruelty. Fortunately these performances come but once a year, allowing us all time to regain psychological ground before the next emotionally strenuous engagement.



Cad Dad: John Diehl in *Joe & Betty*
photo: Carol Rosegg

Joe & Betty

By Murray Mednick
Kirk Theatre
410 West 42nd Street
212-279-4200

Gone Home
By John Corwin
Manhattan Theatre Club
131 West 55th Street
212-581-1212

Two new plays offering backward glances at family life have arrived to bring us comparative approaches to the subject of beleaguered upbringings. Murray Mednick, the veteran dramatist and founder of the Padua Hills Playwrights Workshop, explores his own autobiographical roots in *Joe & Betty*, a series of angular perspectives on a monstrously ill-equipped mother and father, which is being reprised at the Kirk Theatre after a successful run last summer. John Corwin, an emerging talent from Chicago, investigates a young writer's confrontation with his alienated Midwestern origins in an overly quirky enigma of a drama, *Gone Home*. The divergent paths of these playwrights reflect not only differences in sensibility but also in experience—Mednick places his vintage anguish in a capacious framework of understanding, while Corwin's more tunneled view takes detours in cleverish theatrical games that muddle the line between imagination and reality.

By any accounting, a childhood supervised by Joe and Betty should not have been survived. He runs the movie projector at the local cinema and spends his measly wages on hookers; she sits in lice-ridden squalor meditating on the rotten choices that brought her from Brooklyn to the Catskills. Downwardly mobile and behind on the rent, the couple bicker in a stylized staccato about their six neglected kids, one of whom has grown tall enough to escape the crazy household through his bedroom window each night. The question of where 11-year-old Emile is hovers insistently in the air, like the sound of the upstairs landlord pounding her foot when the downstairs yelling roars too loud.

With his focus trained not on the children (none of whom appear) but on the parents, Mednick rescues his play from becoming a "look what they did to me!" saga—those endlessly popular, gruesome tell-alls that narratively culminate in bandaged wrists and lifetime supplies of Prozac. Admirably, the author remains open-minded to the complexities of

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others, no matter how crummy or hurtful they may have been. Dramatically, however, the piece ends on the same grim note that it began, not giving it very far to go. Mednick offers us a journey of sympathy rather than revelation, a claustrophobic character study (idiosyncratically delivered in his neo-absurdist style) of a wife who's ultimately more sinned against than sinning. Hard as it is not to wish she'd rise from her misery (or at least tidy it up a bit), we understand the forces that colluded in dumping her into this unhappy pit.

The spare, efficient production, directed by Guy Zimmerman, is memorable mostly for the gritty performances of the leads. John Diehl portrays Joe as part philanderer, part mama's boy—a man who can't recognize the prison of his own adolescent narcissism. Maria M. O'Brien (who temporarily took over the role of Betty last week from Annabelle Gurwitch) conveys with weeping saucer eyes and cockeyed grace the infinite humiliations women's flesh is heir to, as well as the bedraggled resilience that makes endurance possible if not always plausible.

The double nature of Corwin's title *Gone Home* signifies both the returning to and vanishing of the site of an artist's earliest wounds. Jack has reunited with his family after a bitter 10-year absence. Now 28, he has achieved a modicum of success in New York, though the play slowly reveals that something less auspicious has provoked this reunion. Jack is apparently dying, though the tragic fact is cryptically dealt with, as if the playwright doesn't want to fall into the sentimental trap he has set for himself. Instead, we are treated to entrances and exits of family members who engage an increasingly immobilized Jack in conversation that reveals the dysfunctional pattern of the past.

The diagrammatic action of one-on-one colloquies eventually raises suspicion. Is all this to-ing and fro-ing merely a feverish fantasy of Jack's? If so, his imagination has been seriously hampered by his condition, as none of his interlocutors represent fully developed characters. Broad traits are all that distinguish them, and poor Jack, the vaguest yapper of them all, lacks even a cartoonish identity tag of his own.

The plot is a kind of intricate long day's journey into coma, which, sad to say, challenges the audience to stay awake longer than the fading protagonist. Director David Warren has assembled a first-rate cast, including Josh Hamilton as Jack, Rob Campbell as the father, Kellie Overbey as the mother, and Callie Thorne as the sister. No doubt there's a reason why the playwright requests that all of the actors appear to be in their late twenties. But with real-life holiday angst upon us, who has time to puzzle out the mystery of cardboard caricatures?

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