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E. Haig's Review of "The Behavior of Broadus" at Capital Stage

December 14, 2015 by [etelfeyan](#)

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If you are looking for the perfect holiday play, the current production at Capital Stage is not it. On the other hand, if you are looking for something different, very different, that doesn't offer so much as a season's greetings of sentiment, then "The Behavior of Broadus" is just the ticket.

We aren't going to pretend this is a happy, feel-good, play, but it is a provocative and highly professional production of a musical (the first in Cap Stage's ten years of existence) that features good music, excellent acting, and some very thought-provoking ideas. In other words, "Broadus" is exactly the kind of play that

provoking ideas. In other words, *Broadus* is exactly the kind of play that audiences have come to expect during the rest of the year from this outstanding company. And now, they have broken with their own tradition (“Santa Land Diaries,” “Every Christmas Story Ever Told”) by producing a full-fledged musical that doesn’t ring out the old year or offer a touch of holiday cheer.

The play was written by a quartet of playwrights who call themselves The Burglars of Hamm (don’t ask). Individually, they are Carolyn Almos, Matt Almos, Jon Beauregard, and Albert Dayan, and Mr. Dayan directs this production. (The music, some of it quite musical, including a number of catchy tunes, is credited to Mr. Almos, Brendan Milburn, and Burglars of Hamm). The choreography is by Ken Roht, and the musical direction for this production is by Graham Sobelman (who plays keyboards and is joined by Giorgi Khokhobashvili on violin and mandolin, Ryan “Harpo” Harbert on woodwinds, and Brendan Davis on guitar, banjo and percussion: all excellent).

So, what is this very unusual play about? It tells the life story of one John Broadus Watson (1878-1958) who is portrayed (some license is taken with his real life bio) as a failed preacher turned scientist/psychologist before he went into advertising. Yes, his life took some turns, but most of it (and the area where he made his mark, such as it was) was spent in psychology where, eschewing the Freudian school that was in vogue at the time, he “fathered” behaviorism. And “fathered” in this instance is not an exaggeration.

The essence of the play is to present the efforts of the man to deny human emotion in favor of what might be called “programmed learning.” The rat maze experiments of B.F. Skinner are a good example; Pavlov’s dog would be another. In terms of behaviorism gone mad, Kubrick’s “A Clockwork Orange” comes to

in terms of behaviorism gone mad, Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange* comes to mind.

Watson is not mad, but he is possessed, and he does some objectively cruel things with his experimental subjects (mostly animals). One such human subject is touchingly and dramatically depicted as Baby Albert, who is taught by Watson to fear all things white and furry. Albert as an adult provides the plays denouement in a powerful scene with Watson that is definitely not full of good cheer and bonhomie.

Also telling are the depictions of Watson's own sons, who are made by Watson and his wife into experimental lab specimens so as to turn them into the "perfectly adjusted adults" that Watson firmly believes his rules of child-rearing (no hugging, only an occasional handshake) produce.

His story is told with a large cast that has all but the actor playing Watson taking on any number of roles. And throughout, the ensemble sings and dances in between the sometimes comical and ultimately dramatic scenes that make the production both entertaining and somber.

The cast is superb, led by Francis Gercke as Watson. He gives a great performance in portraying a man whose passion became his hubris, and whose desire to control the destiny of human development became a kind of megalomania. He is ably supported by the ten members of the ensemble. Principal among them are Nancy Zoppi (great soprano and fine acting as Watson's second wife and lab assistant), Don Hayden and Sean Patrick Nill (excellent in a variety of roles, including the two sons, with Mr. Nill offering a fine baritone as well), Andrew Joseph Perez (strong, as always, as Phil the Rat), Tara Henry (in a variety of roles), and most especially Connor Mickiewicz as Baby Albert (perfect as both the infant and the adult that infant becomes)

Albert (perfect as both the infant and the adult that infant becomes).

The rest of the ensemble consists of Alissa Doyle, Tiffanie Mack, Morgana Marie Sommer, and Sara Lynn Wagner. All are more than fine, together working through the many scene and character changes seamlessly. (The constantly changing scenic design is by Stephen C. Jones; Steve Decker is responsible for the lighting and excellent projection designs; Shelley Russell Riley designed the costumes, Ann Closs-Farley the animal masks; and Ed Lee was responsible for the sound.)

“The Behavior of Broadus” is what a Capital Stage production should be: it cuts against the grain in providing an entertaining and thought-provoking evening of thoroughly professional theater. Take a break from the holiday fluff and treat yourself to an evening of top-flight theater.

“The Behavior of Broadus” continues in production at the Capital Stage Theater through January 3. Tickets and information are available at the box office (2215 J Street), by phone (916-995-5464) and online (capstage.org).

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