

Theater

Marjorie Prime and *The Behavior of Broadus* Examine the Mechanics of Our Brains (GO!)

By Steven Leigh Morris

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Photo by Craig Schwartz

Jeff Ward and Lois Smith in *Marjorie Prime* at the Taper

For the first time in years, Center Theatre Group is showing glimmers of what a flagship theater is supposed to do — allow the questions posed in one production to correspond to questions posed in another.

I'm referring to three concurrent presentations in which CTG had a hand: the now-closed *Western Society*, a winking production by the German/U.K. performance troupe Gob Squad, at REDCAT; a new play at the Mark Taper Forum, Jordan Harrison's *Marjorie Prime*; and Burglars of Hamm's new musical about American behaviorist Dr. John Broadus Watson, who treated his orphan children subjects with the same dignity as his lab rats, prodding and rewarding them to prove how behavior can be manipulated. *The Behavior of Broadus* is co-presented by the Burglars and Sacred Fools Theater Company, produced in association with CTG, which commissioned the musical, helped develop it and provided financial and technical assistance. (CTG's public relations department says the main impediment to presenting it on a CTG stage was scheduling.)

Seeing new plays back on CTG stages is a healthy sign. Back in the Middle Ages, when Gordon Davidson ran the place, new plays at the Taper were done more frequently. Under the subsequent regime of Michael Ritchie, new plays at the Taper have been limited to musical *Los Otros* in 2012 and Culture Clash's *Palestine, New Mexico*, in 2009. (And Culture Clash, due to return to the Taper this coming season, was really part of Davidson's legacy.)

These latest productions by or involving CTG represent the antithesis of Davidson's philosophy. He's a social-justice, politically indignant, ethnic-identity kind of guy. CTG's latest trinity is Beckettian. Putting social justice aside for a moment (and David Mamet's *Race* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre certainly does that), the current works ask questions from "how do we know we're human?" to "how do we know we even exist?"

Whether one agrees with the politics of this meditative vision is of little matter. Of far greater significance: The plays in which CTG has been involved seem to be talking to one another.

Directors Matt Almos and Ken Roht turn *The Behavior of Broadus* into a beautifully acted, entrancing spectacle following the life and existential crisis of one John Broadus Watson. A living cartoon, with Almos' ever-so-appealing Appalachian-to-ragtime songs and lyrics (accompanied by a live band), it shows Watson born into a Satan-fearing family, which may well have been related to his pathological need for control.

Hence, as a professor at Johns Hopkins University, he understood that he could manipulate the behavior of rats (played by actors), and orphaned children, through a system of rewards and punishments. This put him in the face of a political-philosophical buzzsaw provided by the Freudians and Jungians, embodied by Jacques Loeb and William McDougall (Bill Salyers and Tim Sheridan, respectively), who figured that dreams explain behavior more explicitly than does behavior modification.

Watson also cheated on his wife (Erin Holt) with his Vassar-grad research assistant (Devin Sidell), which was reason enough for the university to turn on him — a scene depicted humorously as a medieval cabal, with Jason H. Thompson's projected flames spitting onto the walls of Tifanie McQueen's utilitarian set.



Photo by Geoffrey Wade Photography

Devin Sidell and Hugo Armstrong in *The Behavior of Broadus*

Armstrong's priceless performance renders Watson as a slightly odd zealot. And the play certainly has an ax to grind with the cruelty of his mechanistic vision of humanity. The play is, in fact, a plea in our age of drones and robots to remember the value of a poem, and of a sunset, of being "human," which renders Watson a bit of a straw man. (As though Freud's view, blaming every aberration on mommy, was kinder and gentler.) The musical condemns Watson by conflating his theories with his amoral recklessness, even though the two are entirely different entities.

Because to some degree he was right: We're all machines, oiled with chemicals, averse to pain and attracted to rewards.

The machine-essence of being human is precisely what's so stark and wondrous in *Marjorie Prime*.

In Mimi Lien's stock, stark beige nursing home, 85-year-old Marjorie (Lois Smith) discusses her long-ago marriage proposal with a young man named Walter (Jeff Ward), who also, oddly, appears to be the very beau she's talking about. Her memory is now fragmented. He's a robot, subbing for Marjorie's late husband, taking in information fed to him — memories, stories — in order to become a "companion," a conversationalist. He is, in fact, a mechanical parrot. His banter about the past — programmed fictions — alarmingly resemble human rapport. Meanwhile, Marjorie is a bundle of disparate memories, also now fictions, locked into decaying cerebral vault.

Add to the mix Marjorie's adult daughter, Tess, and son-in-law, Jon (Lisa Emery and Frank Wood), a couple battling Tess' suicidal tendencies.

The purpose of life and related questions of what it means to be human are brought to the fore with the slippage of human beings into robots; the vagueness of how that happens is a key point. These machines are all sitting around, laughing at shared memories, as though they're in an Irish bar. The scene is absolutely terrifying, and the logical descendant of Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*.

Those who believe that history, or even memory, is anything but a flimsy invention will be either chastened or enraged. How do we know who we were, ergo who we are? The performances, under Les Waters' direction, are perfect.

The Behavior of Broadus, by *Burglars of Hamm*, at *Sacred Fools Theater*, 660 N. Heliotrope Ave., E. Hlywd. Through Oct. 18. (310) 281-8337, sacredfools.org