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Stage Door Review



An Acorn

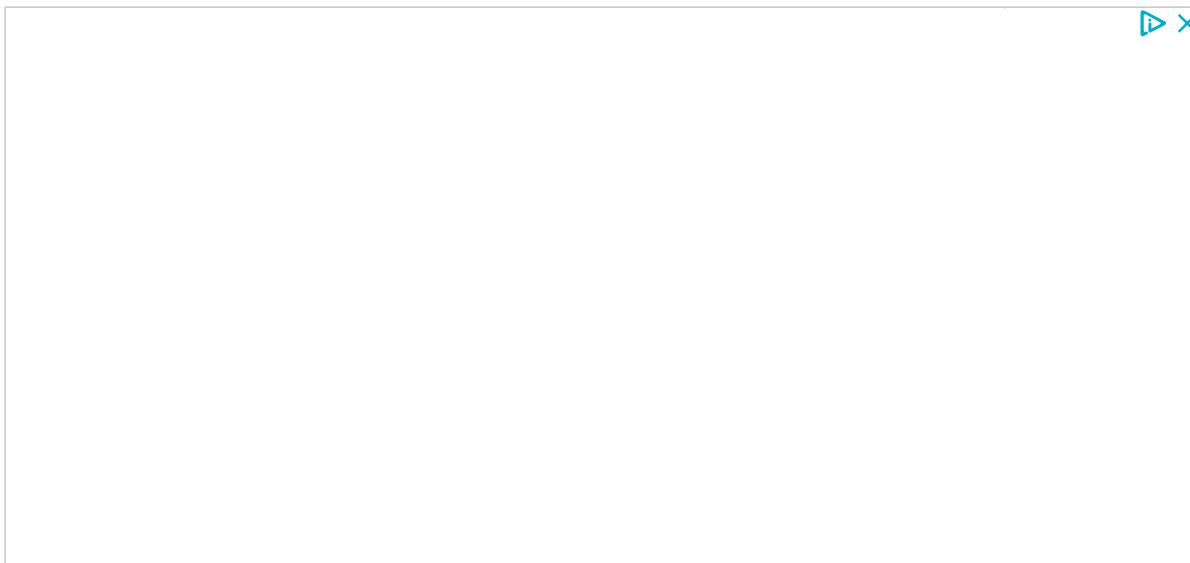
Sunday, March 21, 2021

★★★★☆

**written by Caridad Svich, directed by Kendra Jones
impel Theatre, Toronto
streaming March 13-April 3 2021;
May 6-17, 2021**

“This story begins one morning at 9 AM.
When it seemed as if a certain part of the world changed forever”

The name Caridad Svich will mean little even to avid Toronto theatre-lovers and that is a great pity. Svich, an American Latina playwright, has written over forty plays and is so highly esteemed in the US that she was accorded 2021 OBIE Award for Lifetime Achievement.



Luckily, to go some way towards filling in this gap, impel Theatre has chosen to produce Svich's *An Acorn*. Though the play had its world premiere in 2018, the text captures the present-day's combined mood of anxiety, boredom, disruption, disconnection and anger that one could easily believe it had been written to reflect the struggling psyches of people in lockdown during the current pandemic.

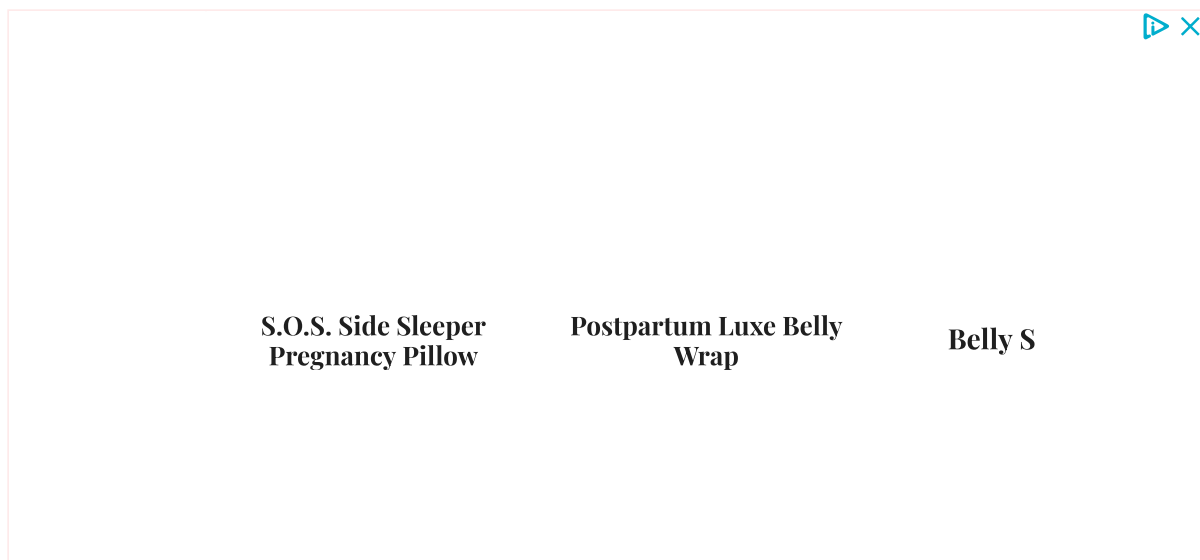
Because of this Kendra Jones, impel Theatre's Artistic Director, had the brilliant idea of staging the play on Zoom. When the play was done in pre-Covid January 2020 at the Department of Performing Arts at Georgetown University in Washington, DC, director Eliza Palter had the two main speakers stand on opposite sides of the stage to signify their isolation. Now we are all too familiar with the eerie disengagement of virtual gatherings on Zoom.

Svich calls *An Acorn* "a text for performance" and it is meant for a cast of 5 to 7 actors. The text is basically a long poem divided among a variety of speakers and addressed to an unknown "you". Jones has chosen four actors rather than Svich's minimum of five since four fits better in Zoom gallery view. Jones has divided the text among the four speakers in such a natural way that you would never know that Svich had not intentionally divided it so.

Svich is not the first playwright to compose a text with unassigned speakers. The best-known of these is Sarah Kane's *4.48 Psychosis* (2000). Like Kane's play, Svich's focusses on time, depression and recurrent imagery.

In *An Acorn* some unspecified disaster has occurred in the US the day previous to the 9:00am when the action begins. (Since the characters have no names, I will use the actors' names to designate each speaker.) Ray Strachan, the first speaker mentions that he is tired of watching the red and blue on the map of the US and seeing how the red is dominating the blue. Ray refers to the red as a famine spreading across the country. Other speakers refer to it as a fire.

All four speakers express a desire to escape to Canada if only they had the means or could summon the will to do so. Early reviewers of the play assumed Svich was portraying reactions to an ecological disaster. Yet, what if what Svich depicts is a political disaster portrayed as an ecological disaster? If it were a true ecological disaster caused by, say, global warming, how could it affect only the US? In such a circumstance escaping to Canada would be no help. Instead, the references to red and blue on a map, the escape to Canada and the mention of what had been achieved "ten years ago", i.e. in 2008, all led me to believe that Svich was referring to political disaster of the 2016 US election that seemed to negate all the progress promised by the 2008 election.



Svich's genius is to transform the mixture of despair and alienation that liberals felt in their own country as the specific result of the election into an exploration of despair and alienation in general. It is for that reason (bar the portrayal of Canada as a safe haven) that the play seems to reflect so well human reactions to the current pandemic.

Through the division of the text and the direction of the four actors, Jones has secured four vividly distinct reactions to experiencing an unbelievable disaster. All four are outraged, but Ray's character has the

most logical turn of mind and struggles with the question of how best to control his rage and how best to keep himself sane during the bizarre aftermath that everyone is suffering.

Blythe Haynes's character is the most emotional of the four. The disaster has destroyed everything she trusted in and she struggles to find an ironic viewpoint from which to look at the event and thus neutralize it.

To these actors whom Jones rehearsed in their roles, Jones has added two who were tasked with approaching the play without rehearsal. Jones says her rationale was to add more "chaos and spontaneity" to the show. Her two choices for the March 13 opening (who are the two in the version available for streaming) are Kelli Fox and Ntara Curry. These two are such fine performers that you would never know that they were delivering unrehearsed readings of the script since they fully match the high level set by Ray and Blythe.



Kelli Fox's character is the one most consumed with rage. Like Ray, Kelli tries to control her rage but it is primarily through stopping herself to pause rather than talking her way through it the way Ray does. Everything that happens to her upsets her, so it is a bit of a surprise, though in Kelli's overheated state it is not far-fetched, that Kelli should take the most absurd action of the four. She decides to write a letter to the ocean to find out the ocean's perspective on what has happened on land. Kelli the actor makes her character defiant in this crazy act while simultaneously showing that her character is fully aware that it is crazy.

Ntara Curry plays her character throughout as if the character were still in a daze of disbelief over the catastrophe that has happened. As she says, “It could be that we dreamed this / It could be that we desired this / It could be that we have no idea who we are”. Her character speaks to the unknown “you” of the play much more as if she is speaking to herself and is allowing the unknown “you” to overhear her pitifully vain attempts to make sense of things.

For the first two-thirds of the 90-minute play, we feel quite strongly that the four actors are playing distinct characters. We feel this despite the fact that they often pick up phrases just used by the previous speaker. Yet, a real sense of the uncanny sets in when Blythe mentions that an acorn suddenly blew in at her window and she took it as a sign of something, though she did know of what. She saves it hoping that it will somehow reveal its meaning to her and thus the meaning of the disaster that has happened.

That fact is strange enough, but when we later hear the other three mention the appearance of an unusual acorn, we have to reassess what precisely we have been witnessing. Ray tells us that when he was seven he had an acorn stuck in his throat and could not speak. That incident came to mind when immediately after the disaster he also could not speak. As we later discover, the other three characters have also suffered hysterical mutism after the disaster. Blythe even consulted a doctor who told her she was perfectly fine. While Kelli was the one who wrote to the ocean, the other three also know about it and seem also, crazy as it is, to be awaiting a response.

In the last third of the play Svich's text indicates even more strongly that the four characters are not as separate as we might have believed. Blythe is the character who decides she must get away and hike out into the woods and camp alone to calm her distress and to gain some perspective on the calamity. Yet, Ray, Ntara and Kelli all speak of taking a similar journey, one that appears indistinguishable from Blythe's. Kelli makes the point that she did not camp in a tent as she had expected but in a small unused cabin by a pond where a famous poet of the past had once stayed, a cabin which other famous writers of his time came to visit.

In American literature it is almost impossible to mention to a poet of the past who lived in a cabin by a pond without evoking, intentionally or not, Henry David Thoreau (1817-62) whose best-known book *Walden* (1854), referring to Walden Pond where he sought refuge from the busy world, is about escaping life in the city to rediscover a simpler life in the midst of nature. As Thoreau writes, "I went to the woods because I wished to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see if I could not learn what it had to teach". Thoreau explanation is precisely why all four characters of Svich's play seek refuge in nature. It is also why all four value the acorn so highly as that little bit of the essence of real life that can help carry them through the aftermath of destruction.

Through the final third of the play we become increasingly convinced that the four characters we've met may in fact four different aspects of the same complex human being.

In her introduction Jones refers to technical problems in the first broadcast which are not apparent in the on demand version except for the unusually long time it takes for the show to begin. Jones mentions

that we should watch the show in gallery view, but the recorded version makes that impossible. It would be interesting to see how much gallery view would affect one's appreciation of the play. Having seen the play in active speaker view, it is possible that seeing three silent faces while only was speaking would be much too distracting. On the other hand, it is also possible that their silent expressions would enhance the impact of the speaker's words.

An Acorn is a truly remarkable play. We cannot be grateful enough that impel Theatre has chosen to present it and has given it such a thoughtful production, especially at a time when it resonates so clearly with our present sense of loss and isolation. *An Acorn* is ultimately about healing and it may be that watching other characters come to terms with disaster will also help the viewer to see that healing is also a natural part of life.

Let's hope this fine production leads to a further exploration of Svich's work in Canada.

Christopher Hoile

Photo: Ray Stachan and Blythe Haynes; Ntara Curry and Kelli Fox. © 2021 impel Theatre.

To view *An Acorn* March 13-April 3 2021, visit www.kendrajones.net.

To view *An Acorn* May 6-17, 2021 with a different cast visit <https://tinyurl.com/2x97ktya>. Blythe Haynes returns joined by Mina Anwar, Darren Jeffries and Ryan G. Hinds.

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