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Happy Days

by Winnie McCroy

EDGE Editor

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Who would have ever thought that playwright Samuel Beckett was so clued-in to the everyday indignities of womanhood? In his two-act **"Happy Days,"** now playing at the Theatre for a New Audience Polonsky Shakespeare Center in Brooklyn, he takes a deep and at times gruesome look at the lives of women, stuck in one place and expected to make the very best of things.

Actress Diane Wiest stars as Winnie, a character buried to her waist in a sandy berm, with only the contents of her massive handbag to keep her amused. Well, that's not entirely true; on the other side of the dune, her husband Willie (Jarlath Conroy) is curled up in a gopher hole, often hidden and mostly taciturn.

That hardly stops Winnie from prattling on. Despite her precarious condition, she rarely complains, choosing instead to recall the good old times, exclaiming often, "Oh, this is a happy day!"

She most often exclaims this when her husband Willie deigns to mutter a single-syllable response to one of her ceaseless questions. In fact, it's the highlight of her otherwise dreary day. She wakes to the sound of a piercing bell and says a prayer. She brushes her teeth, struggling to read the writing on the toothbrush. She drinks some tonic, puts on a hat, looks in the mirror.

At one point, she takes her revolver "Brownie" out of her purses, recollects how Willie asked her to hide it from him, and places it on the ground beside her. Throughout the play, she occasionally talks to it and even pets it, but never fires it. This isn't Chekov, after all.

And she never remarks on why she's stuck in this hole. Her only hope is that one day she will "simply float up into the blue." Winnie, the metaphorical woman, is the first to remind herself to "be a good girl." She's the first to admit that it's never good to sing your song too soon -- but also cautions about waiting too long, about ending up asleep before you've had a chance to sing at all.

At midday, Winnie opens her parasol against the blazing sun. Soon after, it catches fire. She listens to a song on the music box, and is delighted when Willie sings. She files her nails and remembers the last couple who passed, The Showers. Or maybe The Cookers. No matter. They're only there to represent the viewer, wondering "What does it mean?" As she tells Willie, as he's scrambling around in the sand, "What a curse, mobility!" All those timeless quotes she struggles to remember are no longer a balm.

It's night and she puts her belongings back in her bag, instructing Willie on the right way to crawl backwards into his hole. In lesser hands, this character could devolve into a harridan, but Wiest keeps Winnie sunny,

even in Act Two, which finds her buried up to her neck.

That hardly stops her from talking, however. The only thing that interrupts her prattle is the piercing bell, which rings loudly each time she drifts off. Finally, her husband Willie crawls out from behind the sand dune, dressed in a tattered tuxedo, exclaiming, "Win!" Winnie encourages him as he crawls toward her as the strains of the waltz duet from "The Merry Widow" play.

The set is simple, consisting of the aforementioned sandy berm, a blue-sky background, and some scallop-shelled footlights to drive home the underlying vaudevillian feel of the play. It serves well.

Beckett is known for his love of the absurd, but in portraying the plight of this everywoman sinking deeper and deeper into the sands of time, he's hit the proverbial nail on the head. As time goes on, the exclamations of 'Oh happy day!' are far and few between.

By the end of the play, Winnie's prayers have stopped and her curiosity about the world around her is dampened, but she fails to get the relief for which she yearns. In Beckett's work, time proves an eternal and merciless force.

"Happy Days" runs through May 28 at the Theatre for a New Audience, Polonsky Shakespeare Center, 262 Ashland Place, Brooklyn, NY. For information or tickets, call 212-229-4111 or visit www.tfana.org

Winnie McCroy is the Women on the EDGE Editor, HIV/Health Editor, and Assistant Entertainment Editor for EDGE Media Network, handling all women's news, HIV health stories and theater reviews throughout the U.S. She has contributed to other publications, including The Village Voice, Gay City News, Chelsea Now and The Advocate, and lives in Brooklyn, New York.

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