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Wit

by Winnie McCroy
EDGE Editor
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Cynthia Nixon stars in "Wit" (Source:Joan Marcus)

There is nothing funny about cancer. Yet in MTC's staging of the play, "**Wit**," actor Cynthia Nixon manages to evoke both laughter and tears from her enraptured audience.

"Brevity is the soul of wit; if you think this is tedious for the audience, consider how it feels to play my part," says Nixon midway through the show.

Nixon plays Dr. Vivian Bearing, a brilliant, exacting professor of the 17th century poetry of John Donne. Upon discovering that she has stage IV metastatic ovarian cancer, the brilliant researcher embarks on an eight-course experimental chemotherapy treatment, with little hope of recovery.

A breast cancer survivor herself, (and a Tony Award-winner for MTC's "The Rabbit Hole," another profoundly sad play) Nixon brings her body of experience to the role, splitting the difference between the characters ago, 50, and her own, 45, to make Dr. Bearing 48 years old.

The play has no fourth wall; Nixon's character opens by acknowledging the irony that finds her in a play in which she has less than two hours to live. Her cancer is "insidious"; the treatment is "pernicious". She treats words like "hepatotoxicity" and "neuropathy" with respect; alas, they do not return the favor.

Bearing comes to understand the power of language at an early age; in a flashback scene, we see her as a five-year-old child, reading Beatrix Potter before her father. She stumbles over the word soporific. Her father explains that it means, "causing sleepiness". She witnesses the illustration of the sleeping rabbits, and the power of words clicks in her young mind.

By the time she is in college -- and with the help of her hard-lined mentor, Dr. E.M. Ashford (Suzanne Bertish) -- Bearing's attention to language now leaves not even one comma amiss. To her mind, simple human truth and uncompromising scholarly standards are inextricably connected.

Her humanity, her passion only seems to surface when she recites the poetry of Donne, her clipped academic patter softening somewhat. As cancer invades her body, so does it invade her lexicon; Dr. Bearing sees fit to apologize as "her vocabulary is taking a turn for the Anglo-Saxon, but I am going to barf my brains out."

As a teacher, she is unforgiving of error, and merciless with her students, not even deigning to grant a deadline extension to a student whose grandmother has died.

But this perfection cannot protect her. Although she "thought being extremely smart would take care of it," she finds herself utterly alone in her fight. She has no siblings or children, and her parents are dead. Her arrogant and prickly nature has left her without friends, and although she has the respect of her academic peers, she also has their fear; none come to visit her in the hospital.

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In the end, her only friend is her caretaker, Nurse Susie Monahan, played with tenderness and realism by Carra Patterson. Dr. Bearing sees the paradox in the fact that while her tumor is the size of a grapefruit, it is the treatment of it that is imperiling her health.

In a turn of poetic justice, Dr. Bearing's doctors, Dr. Kelekian (Michael Countryman) and his research fellow Dr. Posner (Greg Keller) are equally hard-lined, viewing her as little more than a Petri dish for their experimental cancer treatment. A former student of hers, Dr. Posner awkwardly recalls her on-campus reputation while administering



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a pelvic exam.

This striving research fellow respects Dr. Bearing's "boot-camp" teaching style, and admits that he took her class as a challenge to himself, it being among the three most difficult on campus.

He also coins a term regarding John Donne's poetry, calling it "salvation anxiety", the poet's inability to overcome the barriers separating life, death, and eternal life, as Donne describes it in "Death, Be Not Proud." It is this forgiveness that eludes Vivian; she cannot find love, and in the end, runs out of time to do so.

Despite Vivian's obvious physical decline, Dr. Posner bemoans having to interact with patients as part of his internship, calling his class on bedside manner, "a colossal waste of time for researchers." He views the immortality of culture of cancer cells as "awesome", and revels in a future where lab specimens will be his only regard.

This illustrates the playwright's hopes that the work would speak to the need for physicians to relate to their patients with dignity, as fellow human beings, rather than a receptacle for experimental treatments or procedures. "Herein lies the paradox. John Donne would revel in it," says Dr. Bearing.

Neither doctor (nor the parade of lab assistants) ever really looks into Dr. Bearing's face to acknowledge her humanity; at the end of the play, Dr. Posner checks his patient's charts and suggests more fluids, not even realizing she has died.

"Wit" speaks to issues of class and education, the power of language and the betrayal of the body, and the danger of isolating oneself against the inevitable. At the end, John Donne's metaphysical musings hit home, as both Dr. Bearing's body and refuge in language is demolished, leaving her crying and broken in her mentor's arms, her only solace a children's book about a runaway bunny.

Written in 1999, the Pulitzer Prize-winning play "Wit" is sixth grade social studies teacher Margaret Edson's magnum opus, her only play to date. Although audiences have cried out for more, there is something to the idea of saying everything one has to say perfectly, and leaving nothing out.

Scenic designer Santo Loquasto handles the simple set masterfully, moving from hospital room and exam room to classroom with ease on its revolving platform. Costume designer Jennifer von Mayrhauser does her best, despite that Nixon's wardrobe consists of only a hospital gown and baseball cap, and the occasional IV stand.

And Peter Kaczorowski handles the lighting beautifully, allowing the spotlight to shine at the end, when Nixon disrobes and extends her arms to reach toward heaven, presumably. The effect is a balm, allowing for a satisfying sense of victory in the face of abject sadness, and allowing "Wit" to soar.



"Wit" has been extended through March 17 at the Samuel J. Friedman Theatre, 261 W. 47th St. For info or tickets call 212-239-6200 or visit www.ManhattanTheatreClub.com.

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, where she writes about local restaurants in her food blog, <http://brooklyniscookin.blogspot.com/>

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