



TENSION FOR TWO: (left to right) Oscar winner Marisa Tomei and Frank Whaley as a bickering, unhappy wife and husband in *Marie and Bruce*. Photo: Monique Carboni

Theater Review

Marie and Bruce: play divorced from reality



MARIE AND BRUCE

Written by Wallace Shawn

Directed by Scott Elliott

Through May 7, 2011

Acorn Theater

410 West 42nd Street

(212-239-6200), www.thenewgroup.org

By Scott Harrah

Even seasoned, ultra-talented actors cannot save a play from collapsing through its thematic holes when the script is so flimsy and unfocused, as is the case with this disappointing New Group revival of Wallace Shawn's drama *Marie and Bruce* (first produced at the Public Theater in 1980). Oscar winner Marisa Tomei's acting gifts are completely wasted on this rambling story about an unfulfilled wife, Marie (Ms. Tomei), and her growing rift with her egomaniac, pseudo-intellectual husband Bruce (Frank Whaley). Most well-crafted dramas about marital strife, such as Edward Albee's classic *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, usually contain crisp dialogue and venomous repartee, but playwright Wallace Shawn mostly fills this one act with endless lines of profanity or incomprehensible babble that offers no insight into the characters. Sure, married couples in real life bandy about the "f" word a lot and say sh**, but in a stage play, one expects a bit more eloquence and snappy one-liners to keep audiences interested. Do we really need to hear the character of Marie call her husband a "c***sucking turd"?, among other unprintable appellations, like some potty-mouthed child who has just learned a few "bad" words? It seems that the playwright threw in lots of obscenities because he was unable to come up with anything original for the characters to say.

Granted, maybe Mr. Shawn added all the cursing for shock value to titillate audiences when the play was originally produced 31 years ago, but in 2011, the mock-salty chatter just seems juvenile and meaningless in an age when we have so many Hollywood movies and cable TV shows that blend rough language with innovative lines.

Ms. Tomei tries her best to add depth and dimension to the role of Marie, a woman fed up with everything about her husband (an unemployed writer), from his snoring to his penchant for attending parties and babbling incoherent nonsense to anyone who will listen. Frank Whaley's Bruce is completely oblivious to his wife's unhappiness, continuing to call her "darling" each time she belittles him.

For such a tepid, half-baked Off-Broadway play, The New Group has spared no expense and mounted a lavish production, with an outstanding set by Derek McLane. The set marvelously anchors a swank dinner-party scene, complete with a revolving table, so we can hear various dinner guests espouse gibberish while they sip wine and look at the Andy Warhol silkscreen of party host Frank (Adam Trese) while Blondie's classic disco-pop hit "Rapture" plays in the background.

Unfortunately, the nine cast members are not given much to work with in Wallace Shawn's atrocious script, and the conversations amongst the guest are simply pointless and do little to propel the story forward. At the performance this reviewer attended, an inconsiderate audience member's cell phone started ringing while Frank Whaley was delivering a dull soliloquy about what he did all day. Mr. Whaley stayed in character and politely told the theatergoer to silence the cell phone but insisted not to worry; the story would get better. Of course, Mr. Whaley was wrong; the story went nowhere, like the rest of the play. But this was one of the only amusing moments in the entire show, and far more interesting than the inanity that follows: Tales of boozing, infidelity, and scatological, gross-out references to body functions (please, don't ask).

One cannot blame director Scott Elliott for the show's uneven, scattershot narrative and lack of cohesion, as he does the best he can to get solid performances from the cast, particularly Ms. Tomei, who bickers and brays in all the right places as she tries to desperately find the right time and place to tell her husband she wants to call it quits. However, it is understandable that Ms. Tomei's Marie struggles trying to inform her spouse that their marriage is over, because Wallace Shawn's play is literally all over the place, completely divorced from reality.

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