



**DEATH, BE NOT PROUD:** (left to right) Cynthia Nixon as cancer-stricken English professor Vivian Bearing & Greg Keller as Dr. Posner in the revival of Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *Wit*. Photo: Joan Marcus



*Theater Review*

# **Cynthia Nixon's uneven performance hinders dramatic force of powerful, Pulitzer Prize-winning *Wit* revival**

*WIT*

By Margaret Edson

Directed by Lynne Meadow

Through March 11, 2012

MTC's Samuel J. Friedman Theatre

261 West 47th Street, (212-239-6200)

[www.witonbroadway.com](http://www.witonbroadway.com)

**By Scott Harrah**

Anyone fortunate enough to have seen this Pulitzer Prize-winning drama by Margaret Edmond in its original 1998/1999 Off-Broadway production knows what a emotionally powerful piece of theater it truly is.

Kathleen Chalfant and the great Judith Light (who later took over the role) imbued the lead character, the cancer-ravaged Professor Vivian Bearing, a university professor specializing in the 17th century poetry of John Donne's sonnets, with a mixture of academic authority, eloquence, and human vulnerability that was heartbreaking and lit up the stage. Alas, the same cannot be said for Cynthia Nixon, the star of the play's first-ever Broadway production.

As Vivian Bearing, Ms. Nixon is uneven in all the wrong places and lacks the requisite onstage dynamics that made the Off-Broadway production so memorable. This is shocking indeed, as anyone who saw her luminous, Tony Award-winning portrayal of a mother dealing with the death of her son in the 2006

Pulitzer Prize-winning drama, *Rabbit Hole*, by David Lindsay-Abaire.

However, despite her acclaimed role as Miranda Hobbes on TV's mega-hit "Sex and the City," Ms. Nixon's work on the New York stage has been a series of few hits and many stultifyingly atrocious misses. Playing the lead in the 2006 Off-Broadway revival of *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, Ms. Nixon was shockingly miscast, speaking in an affected, cartoonish Scottish brogue that completely ruined that otherwise superb classic drama.

It would be harsh to say Ms. Nixon is miscast in *Wit*, but she certainly lacks the proverbial acting chops to make Vivian Bearing consistently convincing. Although *Wit* is hardly a comedy, it does contain a few mildly humorous lines, but Ms. Nixon often overdoes it when delivering them, particularly in the opening scene. However, when Ms. Nixon's Vivian is supposed to exude passion about her beloved John Donne's holy sonnets, such as "Death, Be Not Proud," she practically recites her lines by rote.

The stern, no-nonsense Vivian is not supposed to be a likable or particularly sympathetic character, but as Ms. Nixon plays her, she has almost no warmth as her ovarian cancer metastases and ravages her bones and other parts of the body. Part of the genius of Edson's one-act story is watching the arc of Vivian's character as she succumbs to the pain of her stage four cancer and finally displays a sense of vulnerability, but Ms. Nixon mostly plays the part on one shrill note, making audiences feel nothing for her because she is so distant, detached, and soulless.

There are some fine supporting performances here, particularly Greg Keller as Dr. Jason Posner, an oncologist who took Vivian's poetry course as an undergraduate. Especially noteworthy are Carra Patterson as Susie Monahan, the nurse who takes care of the ailing Vivian as the cancer pain becomes excruciating; and Suzanne Bertish as E.M. Ashford, Vivian's solitary visitor and influential university colleague.

This is a difficult story to watch, witnessing Vivian undergoing endless chemotherapy treatments, and hearing her talk with admiration of her lifelong love with literature and Donne's sonnets, realizing that poems are one of the few pleasures she has ever had.

However, as directed by Lynne Meadows, this tepid revival does not do Ms. Edson's brilliant script justice, leaving audiences feeling hollow and shedding little

light on the heavy subject matter.

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