

Theatre Review: *The Two-Character Play*

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Tennessee Williams's *The Two-Character Play* operates within blurred lines: those between reality and fiction, sanity and madness, life and death. Actress Amanda Plummer—a Williams veteran who has previously starred in *The Glass Menagerie*, *Summer and Smoke*, and *The One Exception*—played Clare opposite Brad Dourif's Felice in an Off-Broadway production of *The Two-Character Play* that ran from mid-June through late September 2013. The production, at New World Stages, provided audiences with a rare opportunity to see this complexly layered drama performed. Plummer seemed perfectly at home in the play's surreal world, and her performance revealed the discrete worlds of fiction and reality present in the play as well as the liminal spaces in between. But even as Plummer's performance shed light on Williams's masterfully crafted metatheatrical work, other aspects of the production did not fully commit to the extremes of the play.

Indeed, this is a play of extremes: of theatricality, reality, and emotionality. As the actors—playing characters who are actors—navigate the various layers of reality in the play and their own lives, every situation presents its own extremes. Are these siblings fighting theatrically against the world or against each other? These ever-shifting conditions illuminate various aspects of the characters by presenting situations that call for different reactions. Extreme situations call for extreme actions.

From the start, the visual world of the New World Stages production differed from the one described in the written text, though it maintained ties to Williams's stage directions' spatial descriptions. Alice Walkling's scenic design seemed well suited to the low-key sophistication of director Gene David Kirk's vision. Gone was the papier-mâché giant that the playwright describes as an important part of the set, replaced by a painting of two enormous sunflowers with barely discernable "faces" adorning the back wall of the stage. The skeletal walls of the unfinished set provided a contrast to the concrete

materiality of the piano and the couch, which were covered when the audience arrived. The balance between the objects and ideas that appear “in-progress” (or perhaps “in rehearsal”) and those that are “complete” (or “stage ready”) continued into the play as Felice and Clare wandered onto the stage with the house lights still up.

Some of the production’s stylistic choices were bolder than others: Lara de Brujin’s costume design and Jake Fine’s lighting design both leaned toward theatricality. The players’ clothes were rundown and dirty, in keeping with what a contemporary audience now associates with a world of Beckettian tramps. Likewise, the lighting was crisp and sharp, which resulted in the clear spotlight on the piano, getting a laugh of recognition from the audience, who could recognize the effect as “play” lighting. In other words, the audience understood that the play-within-a-play had a less-than-subtle lighting cue to draw attention to the piano. The costumes and the lighting belonged to a theatrical world that could not be mistaken for “reality,” and Kirk’s use of these two kinds of design was crucial for understanding how this production stood vis-à-vis the play-within-a-play.

There are moments in *The Two-Character Play* where the text and the characters tell the audience that something is a certain way—a prop, a lighting cue, a physical movement—meaning that the director has to choose whether Clare and Felice have “authority” or not. For example, Clare and Felice describe how their characters respond at particular moments to the play-within-a-play—but the manner in which the actors playing Clare and Felice embrace these moments makes the audience wonder how much trust they can place in these characters. Are the actors in control of the moments where the “real world” and the “world of the play” intersect? In this production, they are. When Felice says he is wearing his father’s old shirt with zodiac symbols on it, he actually is wearing such a shirt. When the actors say the lights are lowering, the lighting cue concurs.

Kirk’s decision to give Clare and Felice authority continued beyond design aspects. For example, the scene in Act 2 in which Clare and Felice explain that their characters are too ashamed to look each other in the eye can be played with the actors disregarding that instruction or following it. Here, they do not look at each other. Nor do they look at the audience, which reveals another very particular point of this production: Kirk’s metatheatricality is one that does not rely on audience. His Clare and Felice are playing to an imaginary empty house, rather than the real, full house that sits watching them.

When reading the play, one has a sense that when the “actors” want to convey something about the characters, they simply speak directly to the audience. Of course, this requires the understanding that the “actors” Felice and Clare are very self-conscious about the audience the whole time. Therefore, the act of breaking the fourth wall might continue even within the play-within-a-play. In this production, the play-within-a-play was done as a discrete entity and as a separate performance where we almost entirely lose

the Felice and Clare we had seen previously, creating a blur that makes one question where one play stops and another begins.

The most important aspect of this fresh interpretation was the audience's response. When the "actors" did have moments of contact with the audience, the crowd seemed to react with immense enjoyment. Their smiles, laughter, and energy made it clear that the audience wanted to laugh with the "actors." The first act suffered a bit more from the refusal to connect, as the play-within-a-play is not meant to be a good piece of writing and therefore begs to be mocked. In the beginning of the production, the audience laughed at what is clearly Williams mocking his own earlier dramatic style, and Kirk's direction fully illustrated this point. Yet Kirk allowed the rest of the first act to be a rather straightforward production of the play-within-a-play.

This disconnected aspect illuminates the most prominent flaw in the production. As the ultimate tension in *The Two-Character Play* depends upon a series of extremes, much of the audience's enjoyment comes from seeing the actors—the real performers and the characters-as-actors—negotiate various levels of performance. By flattening out those extremes, and thereby losing the flows of tension and other arcs extant in the script, the play loses a great deal of its depth. Dourif's performance was more stylistically simplistic than Plummer's, but Kirk's production does have moments where the complexity of Williams's work is illuminated. When Plummer stood in the light at the moment when the play-within-a-play had just "ended"—looking out at the audience, yet not seeing it—we could grasp Clare's need for the play to continue; her fear about what will happen if it continues or ends; her love and hatred of the audience and the theatre; and her own appreciation for the feeling of performing and witnessing a play.

This production of *The Two-Character Play* does a great service in that it brought a rarely performed Williams play through a successful Off-Broadway run. The cast and crew succeeded in proving that this piece is still relevant in its exploration of questions of fiction versus reality and the greater question of the place of art in the lives of those who make it and see it. Though this production did not push certain themes as far as it could have, the moments in which two actors captured the delicate balance between the levels of theatricality revealed the full power of *The Two-Character Play*. Clare and Felice might be trapped in a stale theatre performing a tired play, but *The Two-Character Play* itself is still fresh and enigmatic.