

Performance Review: *The Solid Life of Sugar Water* by Jack Thorne

Temporary Theatre, National Theatre

Performance Date: March 5, 2016

Director: Amit Sharma

Designer: Lily Arnold

Graeae Theatre Company is, perhaps, one of Britain's most cutting edge theatre troupes with its mission to expand the acting palette for deaf actors and performers with disabilities by casting them in roles usually played by able bodied performers, like *Blood Wedding* and *The Threepenny Opera*, two of their more recent productions. Jack Thorne, whose credits include *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child* which opens this summer, paired up in 2015 with Graeae to produce *The Solid Life of Sugar Water* first in Plymouth and then at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival before finally debuting at the National Theatre's Temporary Space in February of 2016.



Genevieve Barr as Alice and Arthur Hughes as Phil.

The play immediately catches the audience's attention in two visceral ways: an unbathed, emotionally distant, married couple tries to have sex in bed (no physical interactions take place, instead all the sexual acts are described in graphic detail); and in order to accommodate the audience's sightlines, the set is upended ninety degrees, with the bed and surrounding furniture perpendicularly positioned to the floor. It is a nifty trick, providing us with a cinematic-like position of looking down on the couple from the ceiling during their bedroom interactions. However, what is most telling about *The Solid Life of Sugar Water* is how it presents the disabilities of its two characters, Alice (Genevieve Barr, who is emotionally devastating) and Phil (pluckily played by Arthur Hughes). There is a lack of interest by Thorne to tell yet another stereotypical story of characters with disabilities overcoming their impairments and, ultimately, achieving a happy acceptance by their family, school chums, and/or community. Instead, much like Tony Kushner's presentation of homosexuality in *Angels in America*, Thorne does not provide a rationale and justification for the existence of his characters with disabilities on the stage. Besides a few references to Phil's woeful signing abilities and her skill at lip reading, Alice's deafness is merely one extension of her identity, rather than being her sole identifier. Even less referenced is Phil's right arm, which is not fully formed, and only plays a part in the narrative when he is unable to handle a large box while waiting in a post office line. Instead of being typified as "disabled" characters, Alice and Phil are, refreshingly, just characters, living the same lives and experiencing the same excitement and woe as countless non-disabled theatrical characters that have come before them.

It is the varied aspects of their romantic life that is the true focus of the play. Throughout the numerous attempts by Alice and Phil to make love, which go uncomfortably and, at times, humorously awry, Thorne inserts flashbacks to their developing romance from their awkward first meeting (which involved the aforementioned box) to their ensuing dates to see *Spartacus*, visit the Tate Modern, and have dinner at Alice's flat to their eventual marriage. An additional flashback, which takes place just a few months earlier, is also introduced that focuses on Alice's failed pregnancy. Due to complications, Alice begins to bleed and at the hospital the doctor pronounces their baby to be dead. Because of the possibility that she may not be able to have children again in the future if a C-section is performed, Alice has to push the baby out vaginally. The description

of the experience of giving birth to a stillborn baby is harrowing and powerfully performed. (Thorne has donated all the profits from the printed version of the play to Sands, a charity



*Genevieve Barr as Alice and Arthur Hughes as Phil.*

dedicated to stillbirths and neonatal deaths.) As Alice tells her story of her induced labor, Phil returns to the love making sequence that opens the play, describing their first time successfully making love in the wake of such a devastating loss. The two sequences share the stage at the same time, each character telling the story of their respective moment, blending together the pain of childbirth and the passion of their intimacy, so that when a screaming Alice daughter, she is also achieving orgasm in Phil's narrative,

providing a powerful image of death and life co-existing at the same time. Through such a powerful moment of dramatic narrative, superb acting, and life-altering pain Thorne and Graeae succeed in their mission to erase the societal stigma of disability. Alice and Phil's suffering as well as the reconfirmation of their love is an experience to which everyone can relate. No longer are these disabled characters looked at as "them" by the audience. Instead, their story is one shared by all of "us."

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