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In Selfish Sons and Trolls, Swollen Egos Stride the Stage

by Charles Isherwood

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How exactly do we become the people we are? That knotty question hovered in the air at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theater here. The most intriguing works in the festival, now under the direction of Les Waters, take the audience on engrossing journeys through the thick underbrush of the human psyche as it is shaped by family, society and the divided impulses of the self.

"Gnit," Will Eno's impish adaptation of "Peer Gynt," set the inquisitive tone. The script describes the play as a "rough translation" of Ibsen's epic dramatic poem, which is rarely staged because of its imposing length and its multiplicity of locales, from Norway to the kingdom of the trolls to Morocco and Egypt. Reams of lyrical monologue and sometimes obscure philosophy are probably equally to blame for its status as a landmark of modern theater that even avid theatergoers hardly ever get a chance to see.

Mr. Eno has studied the play closely, and the marvel of his new version is how closely it tracks the original while also being, at every moment and unmistakably, a Will Eno play. Enophiles (I guess I could be called the head of the local chapter) will delight in how snugly Ibsen's peculiar drama accommodates Mr. Eno's flair for playing games with language and his offbeat humor, which cuts to the heart as incisively as it tickles the funny bone.

The first line, croaked in an offhand drawl by the mother of the protagonist, Peter Gnit ("a typo," he shrugs at one point), is quintessential Eno.

Stranded bedridden in her cabin in the woods, Peter's mother glumly says, "Never have children." Then she adds in the same dour tone: "Or, I don't know, have children. Either way you end up talking to yourself."

Portrayed with acidic humor by Linda Kimbrough, Peter's mother doesn't get too much time to soliloquize because her son is such a teller of tall tales. "Maybe if I'd let you babble more when you were a baby, you wouldn't still be babbling now," she says with a sigh as he regales her with another shaggy dog story.

But Peter, played with a nice combination of smugness and sincerity by Dan Waller, is soon off chasing after his destiny -- chasing his own tail, really -- as he lights out for adventure with little regard for his mother's welfare or anyone else's. As in Ibsen's original Peter leads a life driven by allegiance to the idea of fulfilling himself -- whoever he may turn out to be.

He runs off with a bride intended for another, then abandons her with nary a qualm because he's mooning over his real love, Solvay (Hannah Bos). He also takes up briefly with the seductive daughter of a real-estate tycoon (the two stand in for Ibsen's trolls, a delicious touch), and in trying to escape from their clutches he encounters a mysterious voice (Ibsen's Boyg) who reflects back to Peter his own watery consciousness.

Throughout "Gnit" Mr. Eno gently joshes about the weirdness of Ibsen's play while also whittling away its excesses to bring forth its resonant ideas about the destructiveness of self-interest, often disguised as the nobler sounding "being true to yourself."

"Gnit" loses steam in the final going: Ibsen's last act has been condensed too much for my taste. The crucial figure of the Button-Molder, who threatens to steal the hero's soul and melt it together with those of many others who have neither sinned greatly nor nobly shone, is essentially eliminated. Still, what's striking about "Gnit," superbly directed by Mr. Waters and featuring a hilarious turn by Danny Wolohan as several whole groups of characters, is that after climbing the craggy peaks of Ibsen's daunting play Mr. Eno has brought down from its dizzying heights a surprisingly crowd-pleasing (if still strange) work.

Traces of other outstanding recent plays ("Clybourne Park" and "August: Osage County") echo throughout Branden Jacobs-Jenkins's "Appropriate," a highly entertaining and provocative family drama that boasts a superb first act that had the audience humming with excitement at intermission.

The ghost of a white Arkansas patriarch haunts the proceedings. When his children gather at the former plantation house where he recently died to divide the estate, a disturbing memento turns up: an album of gruesome photos of lynchings. The discovery incites an emotionally fraught discussion of just who their father really was.

Flatly denying that he was a racist is Toni (Jordan Baker), embittered by her recent divorce and the loss of her job as a school administrator after her son, Rhys (David Rosenblatt), was caught selling drugs. Her brother Bo (Larry Bull), now a New Yorker, tries to remain noncommittal, but his Jewish wife, Rachael (Amy Lynn Stewart), stirs the pot by asserting that her father-in-law was at the very least an anti-Semite. The ne'er-do-well of the family, Frank (Reese Madigan), is more interested in making amends than digging up dirt.

Mr. Jacobs-Jenkins writes sharp and funny dialogue, and he has peopled his play with complex characters in various stages of awareness -- or denial -- about just how firmly their lives have been shaped by events in the past. But he keeps parceling out the shocking revelations and ratcheting up the conflicts with such relentlessness that the play goes a little haywire.

Although the production is terrifically acted, and directed by Gary Griffin with care for its heated dynamics, there's little anyone can do to tame the excesses of the second act, which culminates in a full-out brawl that doesn't ring particularly true. With some trimming of loose ends and some tempering of the fireworks "Appropriate" could evolve into a solid play.

How our nurturing influences our nature is also a theme in Mallery Avidon's one-acter "O Guru Guru Guru, or why I don't want to go to yoga class with you," directed by Lila Neugebauer. This subversive assessment of the craze for spiritual enlightenment has an odd structure. The first part is basically a lecture delivered (but to whom?) by a 30-year-old woman, Lila (Rebecca Hart), whose aim is to expose the corporate nature of the

modern yoga movement, which she experienced firsthand as a child of a yoga-crazed mother.

The play then abruptly turns into a facsimile of a "satsang," or a gathering for purposes of collective meditation, in which the audience is given lessons in chanting and basic meditation followed by a long shadow puppet show about the Hindu god Shiva. Then suddenly we are on the set for the movie version of "Eat, Pray, Love," where Julia Roberts (Khristyne Haje) dispenses some life lessons to Lila, an extra. This last third has a charming unexpectedness that helps to make up for the lack of real drama that came before. There's cheeky fun in Ms. Avidon's suggestion that a glossy movie star could be as helpful a spiritual guide as the revered leaders of popular movements.

"Cry Old Kingdom," written by Jeff Augustin and directed by Tom Dugdale, is an earnest but muted drama set in Haiti in 1964, when whispers of revolution are beginning to be heard rustling under the iron rule of Papa Doc Duvalier. The play's characters are Henri Marx (Jonathan Majors), a young man desperate to emigrate to the United States; the painter Edwin (Andy Lucien), who is in hiding, having let it be known he died to avoid conflict with the regime; and Edwin's wife, Judith (Natalie Paul), who brings home the news that the time for change may finally be at hand. Although the stakes are undeniably high, the play's serene pacing and semi-lyrical dialogue don't blend too well with the grim revelations that eventually arrive.

The problems troubling the characters in Mr. Augustin's play are a far cry from the first-world irritations faced by those in "The Delling Shore," by Sam Marks, a tidy drama that feels like an American version of a Yasmina Reza play.

Thomas Wright (Jim Frangione) is a popular novelist who has invited an old friend, Frank Bay (Bruce McKenzie), to join him at his chic lakeside summer house. Frank, who works as an editor but knows Thomas from their days as aspiring young writers, has dual aims: securing a blurb from Thomas for his new book and an internship with Thomas for his daughter, Adrienne (Catherine Combs). Thomas's daughter, Ellen (Meredith

Forlenza), looks on, bored and irritated as the men warily circle each other, the disparity between their fortunes causing Frank to bridle and snap.

Perhaps because the mechanically stoked tensions do not really stir much excitement, the actors tend to overact under the direction of Meredith McDonough. My patience began to wear thin well before the characters embarked upon a high-toned parlor game in which they created fictional first lines of books pulled from the shelves. A good rule of thumb for aspiring playwrights: Avoid having your characters play games onstage. Chances are, even if they are enjoying themselves, the audience won't be.