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## Shepherdstown 2017: Race and Faith

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solos, whipping off fouettés, unfolding her leg in a gorgeous supported *développé*, kicking out left and right, and whirling in a series of supported turns.

*Diamonds* was the last of Balanchine's "white ballets," dance's classical apparitions of heavenly perfection. As the finale of *Jewels*, it transforms *Emeralds*' unfulfilled yearning and *Rubies*' symbiotic partnership into a grand vision of human potential, like that of William Blake:

What is it men in women do require?  
The lineaments of Gratified Desire.  
What is it women do in men require?  
The lineaments of Gratified Desire.

The ideal and the actual fuse in *Jewels*' final moment, when the cavalier kneels to the ballerina one last time, and they divulge their dazzling secrets to a gratified world.

—Jay Rogoff

### **Shepherdstown 2017: Race and Faith**

I've been following the Contemporary American Theater Festival for six seasons (often in these pages). Produced each July in Shepherdstown, WV, it focuses on new or nearly new full-length conventional plays (as distinct from musicals or from the "theater pieces" more associated with fringe theater) by contemporary American playwrights, mostly of the emerging variety (though there were productions of newer plays by the well-established Sam Sheppard and Neil LaBute in recent seasons).

In other words, this is a proving ground for fare that may be headed for Off-Broadway and then regional theater, not for either Broadway or fringe festivals. CATF provides thoroughly professional conditions: Equity casts, top-notch sets, excellent acoustics, lavishness of costumes where it's called for—in short (to borrow a phrase from the vocabulary of self-help books) it dresses the shows for the New York or regional theater job they want. There is a seriousness about the enterprise that might seem a bit conservative to some: no messing around with nontraditional casting, nothing fringe-y, limited fourth-wall violations. Those things might appear to some to be major components of the future of the American theater, but CATF exemplifies the present, a present which is not at all ready to consider itself *vieux jeux*. And in many ways, especially in the area of race, the Festival aggressively pushes the envelope.

About half the shows in the last two seasons, for instance, had major and often challenging racial themes, and many of the playwrights were nonwhite. This season, without a doubt, the most racially charged entry was *The Niceties*, by Eleanor Burgess. The setup was simple: At a northeastern university that strongly resembles Yale, Janine, a middle-aged history

professor, goes over a paper with Zoe, an African American student. They differ, politely at first. Zoe's thesis is that the American Revolution was a moderate one not because of the statesmanship of the Founding Fathers but because those who waged it had no desire to right the wrong of slavery and fix the fundamental problems of American society.

Janine demurs. She argues that historians must work with the primary data available, and that everything not found in such data must be ignored. Because nothing that might support Zoe's conclusions stands out in the primary data, she reasons, there is no good reason to subscribe to Zoe's conclusions. Janine's initial lines come across as measured, rational, and supremely composed. Zoe's initial riposte, almost as measured, is that this neat construct consigns us to relying entirely on the voices of white men, history's winners, who had a nearly exclusive ability to create the record and were unreliable narrators. To Zoe, Janine's utter dismissal of her theory ignores self-evident truths of human nature, which should be evidence enough.

As the discussion grows more heated, leading to a crisis that leaks out of the professor's office, it becomes both a proxy for and a microcosm of the larger disputes around race in our country. In the second act (I almost wrote "the second round") Zoe accuses Janine of not being a suitable teacher. When Janine responds she earned her position, Zoe reminds Janine of all the reasons certain potential competitors may have fallen by the wayside on the way to earning that position: "[F]irst came 250 years of slavery, and then came a hundred years of segregation, and then came a deliberate and systematic attempt to exclude black people from good school districts and good jobs and to lock them up or hunt them down for doing things white people do every day. I need you to say that whatever else it stands for, America has systematically persecuted one part of its population, in a way that benefits the other part. In a way that has benefited you. . . . You won fair and square cuz everyone else had lead boots on." The fight culminates with Zoe demanding that Janine make personal reparations for the illegitimate benefit she has received. With the positions of the parties so lucidly laid out, this rather shocking demand seems—less so.

There is little doubt who Burgess thinks the winner is. And that is a mistake. The unwritten rule for shows that are truly duels of ideas generally provide that each side will get enough good lines so that the spectator can reasonably come out agreeing with either. The dispute in *Freud's Last Session*, for instance, could be called for either Sigmund Freud or C. S. Lewis. Burgess opts for the path less traveled and shows one of the women as the clear winner.

The imperfection is more than that, however. The polemic victory for one of the characters means there should be no need to tilt the balance by any other means. Nonetheless, Burgess puts her thumb on the scale, and has the losing party also act corruptly at two or three points. It seems inconsistent with this party's character everywhere else in the play. It would be better, I believe, if the winner had emerged on her own terms

from the clash of views and identities, making this a contest of admirable people fated by skin color and history alone to be adversaries.

This is a minor flaw in a show that will send you out with your mind abuzz: It's a clash of nearly perfectly opposed titans. And there are lots of different ways to deliver the lines. I look forward to seeing other productions with other actresses; the parts are that juicy. (That said, Robin Walsh as Janine and Margaret Ivey as Zoe gave these roles a great sendoff.)

The other two shows with race at or near their center lacked *The Nice-ties'* crystalline clarity. *Welcome to Fear City*, by Kara Lee Corthron, was more ambitious, a look at the Bronx 40 years ago, a time and place where a lot of things happened, and one vitally important thing, hip-hop, came into being. Other occurrences included the tightening of the financial screws on lower-middle-class black families in the Bronx, and the shutting down of economic opportunity, with attendant impacts upon living arrangements, health, and emotional well-being. They included urban decay and what was euphemistically called urban renewal, which focused largely on the destruction of buildings, i.e. the cityscape within which black families were still trying to live their lives. Also the rise of aggressive policing of minority young men via endless stops and searches. This material is all presented in the midst of a loose, black-family dramedy.

Hence, we see: E (Dyllon Burnside), a young man with underemployed mechanical aptitude, afflicted by gay impulses he does not want to deal with and the urge to make some kind of mark in a worse-than-indifferent world; E's mother Wanda (Cherene Snow), who can't safely take in her family because of Section 8 housing rules but does it anyway, and whose respiratory problems mandate a visit to the ER that her finances will not permit; E's sister Neesy (Adrian Kiser), academically gifted but not smart in love, who had followed a man to California only to be ditched, and has now stumbled home to support herself with topless waitressing; and E's friend Cheky (Vincent Ramirez), whose distinction is that he has a "J-O-B" as a UPS deliveryman, but lives only for the block parties where he serves as a DJ.

Their joint frustrations wind them all up tighter and tighter until they must find release. We see E slipping into nefarious activities connected with "urban renewal," as he is observed sardonically by a Rat (Yaegel T. Welch), and fighting to have his rap poetry attended to (his delivery is not very good). We see Neesy flirting with another potential Mr. Wrong. We see Wanda's health declining. And we see Cheky scrappily going on assembling his career, sparking dance parties with stolen electronic gear. Meanwhile, fire is literally consuming the neighborhood.

And in the midst of all this, we witness performances of this new rhyme chanted over rhythm tracks as the ensemble dances. We can feel how this artistic form responds to the pressure inside each of them. The end of the first act communicates the power of this aborning musical style in a performance that involves the audience especially well in the confined space of a small theater-in-the-round. This was a play, not a musical, but the proto-hip-hop performance was recognizably a first-half closer.

The play would have worked fine if it had stopped there. The second act is not as strong, and, comparing what was on stage with what was in the script, it became apparent that that act was more of a work in progress than a finished product. Among the defects was a lengthy transfiguration sequence, where the ensemble devolved first into a sort of enactment of white racist tropes, a minstrel show version of themselves, and then (if I'm understanding correctly) a sort of surreal essential version of themselves, confused by gibberish talk. Then there was a bring-to-date on the characters. Finally, there was a kind of flash forward in which subjects like Ferguson and Black Lives Matter were conjured up, leading to a moment where one character exhorted the audience to declare its solidarity with raised fists—we did, and we walked out happy because we did.

Two observations about that raised-fist moment. First, as already described, it was the culmination of some sloppy playwrighting. Second, it still worked. The crowd with whom I saw the play, mostly senior and white like me, would not seem like an obvious target to have been solicited for the gesture, nor an obvious demographic for cooperating and joining in, especially when (to convey the request) the fourth wall was broken (which in itself always produces awkwardness). But even through the chaos, the show had built up a momentum and an appeal, especially through late iterations of song and dance, that transcended everyone's identities. At that moment we all came from the Bronx. Also, we were crazy about those characters, and wanted to say a rousing goodbye to them.

I hope the sloppiness gets fixed, though; Corthron should lose the transfiguration and the deliberate gibberish talk near the end. I would also lose the Ferguson and the Black Lives Matter material, which is worthwhile but badly anachronistic in a play intended to capture a moment 40 years back.

Instead, I'd urge Corthron to focus on her own title, or perhaps better on what lies behind it. There are two different kinds of fear referenced in the play. One is the fear that informed a real-life 1975 pamphlet further described by Corthron in the program notes entitled *Welcome to Fear City: A Survivor's Guide for Visitors*. It was handed out to New York airport visitors. As the Rat summarizes: "Some corn-fed meatball from Iowa is in Fear City limits just by goin' to Broadway to see fuckin' Annie." Call it white fear for short. It is overblown and foolish. Then there's the black variety: E's fear of asking a boss for a raise, and his fear of doing too much in his questionable cooperation with urban renewal, and Wanda's fear of going to the ER. Where exactly Corthron is going with this theme, however, is not clear, because black fear is not always unreasonable, and often responds reasonably to the objective situation.

The four central characters all end up transcending something by the end. Maybe fear is the wrong word for it. Their transcendence is what matters and what we admired. I am certain that the characters' refusals to give up on themselves or on the Bronx, expressed in, but not only in, the music, is what the audience was identifying with when it raised its collective fist.

In his recent memoir *Dispatches from Pluto*, British writer Richard Grant, trying to suss out race relations in the Mississippi Delta region, proposes this formula: “In the South whites didn’t mind how close blacks got, so long as they didn’t get too high socially and economically, and . . . in the North, it was the other way around.” The town of Byhalia, a poor exurb of Memphis, lies one county over from the Delta, and the play to which Evan Linder has given the town’s name seems to reflect those same Delta racial dynamics. This might be surprising, because in the annals of civil rights struggles, Byhalia is mainly known for a traumatic moment in 1974 when a police killing of a young black man there ignited lengthy boycotts and protests, referenced in the play. But, at least by 2014, the time of the play, things are much more nuanced, and enough water has flowed under the bridge so that a white character does not even recognize the name of the young black man who was shot.

*Byhalia, Mississippi* depicts instead a place where blacks and whites can be close friends or lovers without anyone commenting on it much except when things go really wrong. It’s not giving away a great deal to say what goes wrong here, since that cat escapes from the bag in the second scene: interracial adultery leading to an unexpected biracial child. And a good deal of the play is given over to what one might call the geographic question: whether the white mother should even attempt to raise such a child in Byhalia. But the bigger question is marital: can the white mother who cheated and her estranged husband (who cheated first) reunite despite all the hurt—and can that husband accept fatherhood under these circumstances? The comic tone throughout suggests how these questions will be resolved, but, as in most romantic stories, getting there is the main fun.

These are not generic romantic characters. The wife, Laurel (Jessica Savage), describes herself as a “redneck momma,” and the pejorative label certainly fits her husband Jim (Jason Babinsky) as well. Their story is race- and class-specific. Jim is a weed-smoking, not-really-employed guy who does not look like much of a catch, certainly not what his sardonic Jesus-loving mother-in-law Celeste (Hollis McCarthy) was hoping for for her daughter. Even with Laurel’s job as a schoolteacher, she relies on Celeste to pay the power bill. Laurel summarizes the situation just before the baby is born: “Things are not good, Jim! . . . Things are never going to be good. And you know what? . . . I’m good with things never being good. I’m fine with it.” But of course the revelation of the baby’s race and history is bound to destabilize even this already unstable structure of a marriage. If Laurel is going to rescue it from complete collapse, she is going to require a great deal of centeredness and luck—and Jim.

The path back for this couple will bring Jim into uneasy reliance upon his black best friend Karl (Yaegel T. Welch), and Laurel into confrontation with her old black frenemy Ayesha, Laurel’s boss’s wife (Adrian Kiser). In these encounters, playwright Linder seems to be confirming but also refining Richard Grant’s aperçu. Face-to-face, the racial differences hardly need to be mentioned and play only a small role in how these characters deal

with each other. But the social environment in which these pairs find each other matters a lot. There may not be room enough for someone like Karl to stay friends with someone like Jim. And Ayesha can neither understand nor tolerate the prospect of Laurel raising her half-black baby in Byhalia. Somehow the challenges posed by Karl and by Ayesha must be met.

It emerges that the strongest card Laurel has to play, with both Ayesha and Jim (and also with her mother) is simply her unflinching determination to stay put in Byhalia. There is no suggestion that there is any magic in Byhalia itself; there may be magic, though, in just staying put and going on with one's life plan, not deviating because of changed circumstances.

The virtue of *Byhalia, Mississippi* lies precisely in its modesty. It prescribes no rules, apart from loving one another and telling the truth, for getting through a marital and race-inflected social crisis in a small town; it simply shows how one not-overwhelmingly admirable couple does it. And at that, the true secret here may just be the sitcom-like jokes. Those, and the blackout line at the very end of the play, which may bring a lump to the throat.

Of course the modesty of the play's ambitions preclude it from making the hard observations about race of the two previously mentioned entries, but it does enable some presentation of the way things may actually work out on the ground a lot of the time. There are worse aspirations.

The most ambitious play in this year's Festival may have been the smallest, a one-woman show called *Wild Horses*, by Allison Gregory. This comically indulgent reminiscence of youth, à la *Ah, Wilderness!* or *A Christmas Story*, during its roughly hour-and-a-half running time, covers much ground. The narrator recalls two 24-hour stretches of her life as a 13-year-old, but in them we find ourselves encountering 11 very distinct characters, and dealing with themes as diverse as first encounters with alcohol and sex, strains in a parental marriage, animal welfare, sibling rivalry, teenage friendships and what the passage of the years can do to them, and, most of all, the simultaneous wonder and danger of encountering, as Gregory summarizes in the program notes, a teenager's dilemma of having "so many needs" and "so little power."

This heady mix presents its own combination of wonder and danger, a novel's worth of content shrunk to the size of a play, and presented through a single performer. That performer, Kate Udall, did a jaw-dropping job keeping all the characterizations separate and making us fall in love with her characters.

I have mentioned the festival's sometimes elaborate sets: Sometimes wonder can be evoked by the relatively modest. Here, designers Jesse Dreikosen and Sam Transleau did wonders by parking a camper van at one end of a theater in the (three-quarters) round. As the audience entered, it encountered not only normal raked seating on three sides, but also a few tables and stools in the middle where some of the spectators sat, and, at the far end, the camper fitted out as a working refreshment stand serving audience members until the action began. After Udall's character, identi-

fied only as The Woman, entered, the camper became a Swiss Army knife of adaptability, serving in turn as basement bar, the side of a house, stash for props, and situs of a wild experiment in driving by the narrator's earlier, completely untrained self. Meanwhile, the space between the spectators at the tables became a range The Woman could freely roam, rapidly changing orientation so that the great annoyance of theater in the round, speakers facing away from spectators, was minimized. And because the play was presented as an act of raconteur-dom anyway, which presupposes an audience, there was no fourth-wall problem when The Woman interacted with audience members (asking them, for instance, to hold her purse or turning one of them into a quondam steering wheel).

Have any teenager's real-life few hours really been so full of incident? Probably not, and the compression does take a toll on dramatic verisimilitude. One audience member I spoke with on the way out was clearly troubled by this. It did not bother me because "turning the accomplishment of many years into an hourglass" is what theater does, and shoving some of those accomplishments closer together in the time represented is a traditional move. What matters here is not the strictness of the account (in real life a raconteur putting a satisfying tale together is often apt to take just such liberties with the timeframe). The point is the group portrait of the youngsters (The Woman's younger self, her partners in crime Zabby and Skinny Lynny, the callow young men who pursue them or whom they pursue, and The Woman's big sister, aka The Favorite) in all their confusion, pain, and, most important, their exuberance and their desire to meet life head-on, even if they do not really know what that meeting will demand or entail.

If the compression did not bother me as a dramatic strategy, it did trouble me a bit as dilution of message—as with *Fear City*. With so many themes wandering around in a single play, there are likely to be some underdeveloped issues and some tonal dissonances; the drama in the parents' lives, for instance, seemed a bit too sketchy, lacking explanation or depth. And because of the dominant ruefully comical tone set by the narrator's own adolescent experiences, it was not really possible to assess how we were supposed to respond to the parents' separate trials, which could have been either tragic or not, based on the limited evidence presented. (We get it and can forgive, of course, that a teen's self-preoccupied mind may tune out the pain among adults in close proximity, but a storyteller does not enjoy the same privilege; the audience's curiosity about all the major characters should ordinarily be satisfied.) Likewise, the animal welfare piece came with too few explanations. It looked as if the protagonist and her friends had stumbled on a major piece of villainy, but maybe not, and in any event we did not learn much about the putative perpetrators. Still, these are minor carps. This was my favorite of a very strong field.

And speaking of overstuffed plays, that charge can certainly be laid at the feet of *Everything Is Wonderful*, by Chelsea Marcantel, although the stuffing here was more philosophical and closer to tragedy. At the heart of



the issues was the tension between the benevolence that religions preach and their response to apostates, a tension particularly vexing with largely closed, self-involved faiths like the Amish. The more closed a community is, the harder it becomes for that community to live up to the benevolence it preaches, particularly towards those who have challenged the integrity of the community by leaving it. Protection of the community boundaries tends to trump benevolence. And there is a problem at the opposite extreme as well: Solicitude for a community's boundaries may lead to too-ready reconciliation with those who have violated its standards but remained in communion.

Marcantel has dramatized these paradoxes in the context of an Amish community. On the evidence of the play, the Amish are generally peaceful and forgiving; indeed, we are introduced at the outset to Eric (Jason Babin-sky), a young outsider who through negligence has done a terrible wrong to the community, and comes seeking forgiveness and healing, receiving plenty of both.

The treatment we witness Eric receiving provides a striking counterpart or counterpoint, as the case may be, to the community's treatment of two other young violators of its standards, Miri (Jessica Savage) and Abram (Lucky Gretzinger). The difference in the treatment they receive is partly owing to the nature of Miri's and Abram's respective transgressions, but also depends upon how they relate to the community's boundaries.

Miri, having left the community, has been excommunicated, so that she cannot sit at her family's dinner table or sleep under its roof or touch them, a penalty which is as keenly felt by her family as by her. Yet, as we eventually learn, she left only when those community boundaries failed to provide her meaningful protection or support in the light of a wrong done to her. Abram's failing is not revealed at once, but he has always stayed within the group, and has in consequence received the community's absolution in a way that seems far too easy.

In short, we are witnessing a situation where community sanctions, perhaps rational in the abstract, lead to irrationally unequal consequences. Dramatically, this conflict cries out for someone to defend the community, to justify its ways. Yet for better or for worse, the community, the antagonist which has created this ethical mess, is not directly represented. Instead, there are only the three members of Miri's estranged family: sister Ruth (Lexi Lapp), mother Esther (Hollis McCarthy), and father Jacob (Paul DeBoy). When we see the community meting out its inequitable justice, we see it happening only through them, and they too are victimized by it. They do what they do simply because it is what is laid down in the *Ordnung*, the group's unwritten rules. It is a code as unequal to the tests presented to it as is the code of military justice which forces Captain Vere to hang a virtuous young man in *Billy Budd*. And the *Ordnung* is just as unapproachable and unchangeable in its abstractness as that code.

The story here is, thank goodness, not *Billy Budd*; the conclusion will not prove quite so bleak. However, that statement must be followed imme-

diately by the acknowledgment that it is not easy to figure out what happens in the conclusion. I spoke with a number of members of the audience about it, and none of us could work it out. The script makes the obscurity a little clearer, but there seem to be limits even on the page. Throughout the play, there are shifts back and forth between the present and the past, and part of the key to the end is that present and past occupy the stage together. Things happen in that space that probably could not literally happen anywhere in the “real” fictional timeline. Those things create the feeling of resolution, but perhaps without the play having fully earned it.

Clearly, what the characters need is an overthrowing of the *Ordnung*, or at least the insertion of some exceptions to it, so that they can effectively forgive each other. Nothing short of that will earn the feeling that the ending strives for. And it does not seem as if that has actually occurred in the world of the play, notwithstanding a sort of transfiguration of the entire ensemble in the show’s final moments.

In reacting to the play as a whole, therefore, we need to take a step back from the conclusion. And fortunately we can. We do not need the last few minutes, or at least not this version of them. If the resolution enacted before us is wanting, the sketching out of the problem is beautifully done. We have been brought to the point where we can see clearly how religion has let its adherents down, and how the way past that disappointment lies in human connection, moral accountability, and forgiveness. Whether these particular characters achieve it is not that important.

The play may be set in an Amish world, but dramas with many similarities could be set in Catholic or Jewish or Muslim worlds, and probably among most other faiths. I do not read Marcantel as indicting religion as such; she shows us how much groundedness and understanding faith gives, and not just what faith frequently takes away. Every faith needs, and has, its own *Ordnung*, but in order to live fully and well, Marcantel seems to be saying, believers will always need to transcend it. And then, as the play hints, believers will also need to return to it. Every faith journey will thus be a work in progress, forever.

A faith journey taken to a different kind of extreme is the subject of David Meyers’s *We Will Not Be Silent*, which imaginatively recreates the Gestapo interrogation of Sophie Scholl, a young woman whose religiously inspired resistance to the Third Reich led to her execution by guillotine in February 1943. This kind of confrontation is almost a genre. We have witnessed the scene in various ways at various times, but the essentials do not differ. There is always a table. There is always uncomfortable lighting. The inquisitor always has the full powers of the state at his back. The prisoner answering the questions is often restrained, sometimes under torture, usually in fear for his or her life. And, given the situation and the nature of the prisoner, the outcome is usually a foregone conclusion. The state will win the legal contest, and the prisoner will pay with life or freedom.

But on the stage in front of us, the prisoner and the interrogator are primarily fighting over something other than the prisoner’s survival, and for

that reason the odds in the contest are not as lopsided as they may seem. The fight is over souls: not only the prisoner's but the interrogator's. And from a dramatic standpoint, this is the real struggle.

In the play the interrogator is named Kurt Grunwald (Paul DeBoy), although it would appear that he is based on a real-life Gestapo investigator named Robert Mohr. Like the historical Mohr, Grunwald apparently tries to save Scholl by having her inform on her brother. Perhaps unlike Mohr, Grunwald also tries to give Sophie (Lexi Lapp) a chance to go free by letting others take all the responsibility, though Grunwald fully and correctly anticipates that she is unlikely to agree to saving her skin in that way.

And this is the interesting twist: We do not know what kind of game Grunwald is really playing. On the evidence presented to this point in the play, when he offers these outs to Sophie, he might be serious or he might just be trying to provoke acts of self-sacrifice which will have the not-so-incidental effect of more firmly incriminating her. And that ambiguity as to Grunwald's strategy betokens an ambiguity about his motives, indeed about what he is going through. Is Grunwald actually a secret admirer of Sophie's heroism, unwilling to emulate her simply because he lacks her courage, or are his professions of empathy with her situation just a secret policeman's trick? Does he know the answer himself? The author does not tip his hand on this dilemma until the last three pages of the script.

The genius of the play is how this ambiguity is handled up until those last three pages. There is a certain progression in such dramatic interrogations. We know it from examples like the interrogations of Thomas More in *A Man for All Seasons*, and Cromwell's examinations of Anne Boleyn's doomed associates in Mike Poulton's dramatization of Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall*, and the Mossad dialogues with Adolf Eichman in Evan Weiner's *Captors*, Danforth's interrogation of John Proctor in *The Crucible*, and a thousand movies. It typically, if not invariably, includes stages such as denial by the accused, apparent exoneration, partial confession, attempts to win over the interrogator, self-doubt of the interrogator, promises of leniency attached to unacceptable conditions, existential crises on the part of the prisoner, and finally a reckoning, in which we learn which of the two has prevailed. The listed stages all occur here. And in every one but the last, the ambiguity is preserved and grows richer, because Grunwald's pressing of Scholl for either a confession or a conviction could plausibly stem from a desire to make an example of her for the Third Reich, or a martyr of her for those who find the Third Reich horrifying.

Ultimately, just as the play establishes, Scholl was executed a day after a brief trial. But her memory has been kept very much alive in today's Germany. So in real life she fulfills the exemplary function of martyrdom; in the world of the play, however, it seems most likely that her example will be forgotten. That risk of oblivion heightens the existential question confronting her: If by betraying her principles she could prolong her life, as opposed to adhering to her principles, dying, and having no impact

at all, which choice should she make? And this is not just her existential question: It is his as well. It would appear that Grunwald has made the opposite choice. But has he? The very end of the play reopens that question. The theatergoer will not resolve these moral and logical dilemmas entirely, but will leave the theater breathless from identifying and working through them as far as he or she can.

As these summaries hopefully establish, this was a challenging, thought-provoking, and frequently rousing selection of plays—I believe the festival’s strongest season on my watch, further confirmation, if any were needed, that today’s American playwrights are a versatile and powerful breed.

—Jack L. B. Gohn

These comments appeared in substantially different form on the Baltimore page of *BroadwayWorld.com* in July 2017.

**Megan Marshall, *Elizabeth Bishop: A Miracle for Breakfast* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2017), 384 pp.**

In the nearly forty years since Elizabeth Bishop’s death in 1979, her reputation has grown to exceed that of any of her contemporaries or successors. Her friend Robert Lowell stands nowhere close to the pinnacle he stood on at the time of his own death in 1977, while John Berryman, Randall Jarrell, Anne Sexton, or Theodore Roethke scarcely challenge Bishop’s supremacy. The next generation of poets, born a decade or more later, for all their acknowledged technical and human accomplishments haven’t and probably won’t win the special place accorded Bishop. To put it flatly, she is the poet no one is permitted to condescend to, surely not to dislike. Brett Millier’s sturdy 600-page biography of the poet appeared in 1993; the Library of America has published in one volume everything of Bishop’s except her incomplete, unpublished work, which has been collected in *Edgar Allan Poe and the Juke-Box*. Now Megan Marshall, who won a Pulitzer some years back for her biography of Margaret Fuller, has ambitiously attempted a very personal account of Bishop’s life, while singling out for brief commentary a score or more of, in Marshall’s opinion, her best poems.

What makes this book something other than a straight biography is the active presence in it of the biographer. Marshall has chosen the somewhat risky procedure of alternating her account of Bishop’s life with a parallel (much shorter) one of her own. A student at Radcliffe in the 1970s, she took writing courses from both Lowell and Bishop, and the six parts into which her book is divided are each prefaced by an account of her own relation to the scene in question. For example, the book begins not with Bishop’s childhood, but with an account of a memorial service held for her at Radcliffe shortly after her death. Marshall gives us the picture of an audience waiting for the poet John Ashbery, who is scheduled to kick off