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ARTS&

TRADITION

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Seeing an actual painting, rather than a reproduction, can make a huge difference, according to artist Niko Chocheli. “The Return of the Prodigal Son” by Rembrandt van Rijn at the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia.

Learning from the Masters

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The statue of Francesco Petrarca at the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, Italy.

POETRY

Introducing the Sonnet

How 14 eloquent lines bring clarity

LORRAINE FERRIER

“They are eloquent who can speak low things acutely, and of great things with dignity, and of moderate things with temper,” Cicero wrote in “The Orator.”

The traditional sonnet can allow this level of communication to occur. The rhyme and rhythm of a sonnet may even evoke the poem’s meaning before the words are actually understood. This is due to the structural integrity of the sonnet.

If the structure is lost, so too is the harmony—of the rhyme and the reason. Like musical notation without its bars, it falls from grace into discord.

The two main types of sonnet are the Petrarchan sonnet and the English sonnet, also known as the Shakespearean sonnet, as this is the type of sonnet Shakespeare wrote. They differ in their rhyming schemes, but both encourage eloquent discourse.

How the Sonnet Came to Be

The first sonnets were thought to be written between 1220 and 1250, at the court of Emperor Frederick II of Sicily, in southern Italy. It was the emperor’s notary and legal assistant, Giacomo da Lentino, who wrote the majority of these sonnets.

Sonnets were used as poetic dialogue in the court to convey arguments and counterarguments, explore ideas and concepts, and normally end with a solution. The sonnet gave the court poets a vehicle to demonstrate their wit, wisdom, and intellect.

In the 1330s, Francesco Petrarca, more commonly known as Petrarch, popularized the form. The Petrarchan sonnet is the Italian sonnet as we know it today. Petrarch’s “Canzoniere,” or “Song Book,” written over 40 years, contains 317 sonnets along with other kinds of poems, for example, ballads and madrigals. Petrarch’s “Canzoniere” inspired the love poetry of Renaissance Europe.

The Petrarchan sonnet uses a “volta” (turn) to divide the 14 lines of the sonnet into two distinctive parts. The first eight lines (the octave) are an outpouring of a problem: the

thoughts and feelings that need addressing. It’s at this point in the sonnet that the volta comes, where the poet redirects or restates the idea, thoughts, or feelings. The last six lines (the sestet) address the issue, emphasize a point, and normally provide a solution.

The rhyming scheme of a Petrarchan sonnet is ABBA ABBA for the octave and CDE CDE or CDC DCD for the sestet.

Petrarch also stretched the sonnet into longer narratives by stringing several sonnets together, as seen earlier in Dante Alighieri’s “Vita Nuova” written 1274–91.

The word sonnet derives from the Italian ‘sonetto,’ meaning sound.

How the Sonnet Came to England

In 1520, the sonnet came to England, to the court of King Henry VIII, where Sir Thomas Wyatt and Sir Henry Howard, the Earl of Surrey, wrote the first sonnets in English.

Wyatt became acquainted with French and Italian poets when he traveled to Italy and to the papacy on diplomatic missions. When he returned to England, Wyatt translated Petrarch’s sonnets.

Wyatt adapted the Petrarchan sonnet to make the last two lines rhyme (the couplet), and Howard changed the octave to introduce more variation in the rhymes. The rhyming scheme of the English sonnet is ABAB CDCD EFEF GG.

In general, the rhythm of sonnets in the English language follow an “iambic pentameter,” meaning each line must have five (penta) “iamb.” One iamb is one unstressed syllable and one stressed syllable.

Shakespeare’s couplet in “Sonnet 18” sums up the enduring romance of this poetic form:

So long as men can breathe, or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

FILM REVIEW

A Personal Homage to a Stage and Screen Star

JUDD HOLLANDER

NEW YORK—One thing writer and performer Sarah-Louise Young makes clear at the outset of her show “Julie Madly Deeply” is that she is not Julie Andrews, though she is clearly an unabashed fan of the legendary star and doesn’t care if the whole world knows it.

Mixing song, dance, anecdotes, and audience participation, Young has fashioned a salute to Ms. Andrews’s decades-long career, while at the same time showing what the star means to her personally. The show is currently running at 59E59 Theaters as part of their annual Brits Off Broadway Festival.

Taking place in a cabaret-style setting and going in, more or less, chronological order, “Julie Madly Deeply” traces the life and career of Andrews from her early years in Great Britain to her Broadway triumphs of “The Boy Friend,” “My Fair Lady,” and “Camelot,” and to her subsequent film success in “Mary Poppins,” “The Sound of Music,” and beyond.

Young brackets the piece by reading aloud two heartfelt letters that she wrote to Andrews: one when she was a star-struck little girl; the other after being in the audience for a landmark 2010 concert Andrews gave in London.

Young has clearly done her homework, as shown with the theatrical information and bits of trivia she imparts. For example, director Moss Hart took Andrews in hand to help her prepare for the role of Eliza Doolittle in “My Fair Lady.”

And, if Andrews missed a performance of “Victor/Victoria”—a show that marked her return to Broadway for the first time in 35 years—there’d be a riot at the box office.” Having had tickets to a performance of that show on a night Ms. Andrews was unable to perform,

I can personally attest to Young’s accuracy.

A vital part of the show is the connection that Young works to establish with her audience. She asks various questions, such as who among those present has never seen “The Sound of Music”—one person hadn’t the night I saw the show—and who has had the good fortune to see Andrews live on stage.

Young notes that once you’ve heard the lyrics to some of the songs Andrews made famous, they become part of your DNA, and Young invites audience members to join her in singing some of them.

Young also recalls the time she went to Salzburg, Austria, took the “Sound of Music” tour, and then led her fellow tourists in a “Sound of Music” sing-a-long.

While Young states that “there is so much more to Andrews than spinning in the Alps, [and] flying over rooftops,” these are precisely what most people think about when Julie Andrews comes to mind.

That said, it’s an irony that the structure of “Julie Madly Deeply” itself covers much of Andrews’s post-“Sound of Music” career in a quick montage of name-dropping without really delving into those works. And so Young’s show opens a window on the flip side of success. It shows how, when someone creates one or more indelible roles, they will forever be associated with them in the minds of the public—no matter what else they may do or accomplish.

Young does address some darker elements connected with Andrews’s personal and professional life, and does so with a bit of pointed satire, but she never takes the audience completely out of their comfort zone. Thus she shows us, through the commentary of a racing announcer, some of the turmoil Andrews faced growing up. And she demonstrates Andrews’s feelings for the British press



Michael Roulston and Sarah-Louise Young in “Julie Madly Deeply.”

‘Julie Madly Deeply’

59E59 Theaters
59 East 59th St.
New York, NY 10022

Tickets
646-892-7999 or 59e59.org

Running Time
1 hour, 55 minutes
(one intermission)

Closes
June 30

via the sometimes inane questions they ask. These questions show the habit of treating interviewees as little more than commodities.

In a role that calls for part actress, part singer, and part host, Young is able to convey an infectious amiability and an unbridled awe in what Andrews has accomplished in her career.

As an excellent singer, Young manages a very good vocal impersonation of Andrews at points. (She also does a good impression of Liza Minnelli and Audrey Hepburn—who both figured significantly in Ms. Andrews’s career.) Young is also a rather good comedic dancer.

Music director Michael Roulston proves himself to be a perfect foil for Young. He drops in comments when necessary, while accompanying her expertly on the piano throughout.

Director Russell Lucas has staged everything with a rather loose feel. He lets Young take the lead as she relates her story, but never allows any one moment to linger too long or fall more than a moment into parody.

Also quite good is the costume-design work by Anna Braithwaite, especially the rather whimsical “Sound of Music”-related outfit that Young wears to start Act 2.

An enjoyable, if not all that deep, piece about a show-business legend and someone on whom that legend made a lasting impression, “Julie Madly Deeply” ultimately reveals more about Young than it does about Andrews. Which may have actually been the point all along.

Judd Hollander is a reviewer for Stagebuzz.com and a member of the Drama Desk and the Outer Critics Circle. He can be reached at bnchpeop@aol.com

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ALL PHOTOS BY THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART



This set of 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac is carved from flawless pale green jade, Qing Dynasty. (L–R for each row) the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, rooster, dog, and pig. Gift of Heber R. Bishop, 1902.

Be a Pig This Year

(After You Learn What It Means)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art Exhibition ‘Celebrating the Year of the Pig’

J.H. WHITE

There are usually two times a year when I introspect deeply: the New Year and my birthday. Since I’m a Cancer in the Western zodiac, with my birthday falling between June 21 and July 23,

it’s almost time for my second round of contemplative growth. While I don’t follow daily or annual horoscopes, I do find the personality traits associated with particular Western zodiac signs to be highly accurate. Recently, I’ve wondered about the characteristics of

the Chinese zodiac, a cosmic system I know nothing about, outside of vague glances over paper placemats at Chinese restaurants.

As art and historical artifacts often have deeper, more tangible, impacts on me, I visited The Metropolitan

Museum’s exhibition “Celebrating the Year of the Pig” to better understand the Chinese zodiac and to glean any wisdom about how to make this a fruitful year.

12 Animals

The traditional East Asian lunar calendar repeats every 12 years, and each year corresponds to an animal in the Chinese zodiac. Similar to how each monthly sign of the Western zodiac correlates to a constellation with specific personality traits, the 12 Chinese animals from each year have their own unique personalities.

Depending on what year you are born, you’ll share the traits of either the rat, ox, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, ram, monkey, rooster, dog, or pig.

The Met’s exhibition displays a charming set of 18th-century jade figurines, called the “Twelve Animals of the Chinese Zodiac.” The carved animals are hybrids—both animal and human—artistically suggesting that people do, in fact, have the characteristics of these zodiac animals.

In an audio interview on The Met’s website, the curator of Chinese art, Jason Sun, says, “The artist worked very hard to present the 12 animals in 12 different postures and to give them 12 different things to hold in their hands—fans, whisks, staffs.”

Each animal is only 2.25 inches tall, making their unique physicalities particularly impressive since jade is such a hard stone to carve. Made of flawless pale green jade, this set of carvings must have been especially treasured, as two other sets identical to this one are part of the imperial collection held in the Palace Museum of Beijing.

“When you look at them, it’s really [then] that they talk to you,” says Sun in the audio interview, pointing out their lifelike features.

A Disciplined Pig

In the West, there are no positive connotations associated with being called a pig. However, in the East, if you’re born in the year of the pig—which includes 1947, 1959, 1971, 1983, 1995, 2007, and 2019—you have many positive, and even adored, qualities.

The pig is a symbol of prosperity and wealth, stemming from the animal’s importance in an agrarian society. A person born in the year of the pig is also a

I visited The Metropolitan Museum’s exhibition ‘Celebrating the Year of the Pig’ to better understand the Chinese zodiac.

A 6-inch-tall Qing Dynasty porcelain figure of the Pig. Gift of Birgit and Peter Morse, in memory of Betty and Sydney Morse, 1992.



joy to be around, often friendly, generous, and hardworking.

In the exhibition, the figurine “Zodiac Figure: Pig” from the Qing Dynasty perfectly embodies the charisma and fun-loving spirit of the animal. Like the Twelve Animals, this six-inch porcelain pig has been anthropomorphized and stands like a person, and certainly radiates the pig’s cosmic traits.

His turquoise and aubergine-glazed clothing gives his character a brightness that’s also reflected in his physicalities, like he’s giving a speech to a large crowd, or is the epicenter of a party. With his mouth curved upward in a jubilant smile and his fingers of one hand poised, the pig seems like he’s about to deliver the punchline of a hilarious story. One could even imagine an audience surrounding him, hanging on his every word, ready to erupt.

Interestingly, while a pig in the West is synonymous with gluttony and insatiable desires of all sorts, pigs in the Chinese zodiac let themselves enjoy life, but they can also be disciplined and are not wasteful spenders. A pig personifies Confucius’s wisdom—“When prosperity comes, do not use all of it.”

Pigs as Talismans

Pigs were depicted on pottery as far back as 5,000 B.C., illustrating the animal’s societal importance. The Chinese character for the word family—“jia”—even depicts a roof over a pig. Not only was the pig the first domesticated animal to be used as livestock, but homes back then had two levels: the upper for people; the lower for pigs. Later, the pigpens were detached from where the people lived, but the sentiment remained the same—where there’s a pig, there’s a home.

During the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), it became common practice to bury the deceased with small jade pigs and architectural models of pigsties to summon good fortune in the afterlife.

The Met’s exhibition showcases several of these good luck charms found inside tombs. “Pig in Recumbent Position” from the 6th century is particularly timely since its medium is earthenware; 2019 is the year of the Earth Pig.

Like all animals in the Chinese zodiac, there are five types of pigs, each repeating every 60 years, and named after the elements of metal, water, wood, fire, and earth. The Earth Pig is recognized for being particularly organized and clean, which again is an ironic twist on the Western connotations for words like pigsty, associated with messiness.

Being authoritative is also a characteristic of the Earth Pig Year. While another figurine also called “Pig in Recumbent Position” but made of dolomite doesn’t exactly represent an authoritative nature, the piece does exude an almost noble quality, with its simple aesthetic. The pig seems relaxed, like he’s just taking a quick break before heading back to work.

Like many of the pig’s seemingly paradoxical traits, what I glean most from the art in this exhibition is that lifelong prosperity, of which the pig is famous for, requires a balanced perspective—hard work and rest; sacrifice and enjoyment.

“Celebrating the Year of the Pig” is showing now until July 28 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

J.H. White is an arts, culture, and men’s fashion journalist living in New York.

FINE ARTS

Learning from the Masters

Classical artist Niko Chocheli discusses how great art impacted him

LORRAINE FERRIER

Georgian Artist Niko Chocheli, of the Chocheli School of Fine Art in Doylestown, Pennsylvania, shares a selection of masterpieces he saw as a teenager. Growing up in Soviet-occupied Georgia meant Chocheli could only travel within the Soviet bloc to view art. Here’s how viewing those artworks shaped his understanding of art.

When I was very young, my parents would take me to great museums. I already loved art, well enough that it was my life, but now I needed to know how it was all done and who these great artists were that I’d been so inspired by.

Both my parents were traditionally trained artists, so they knew and understood how important it was for me to understand and to appreciate the tradition. They knew that I needed to meet these people in person, so to speak, to see the original art in front of me. I had many art books, but a reproduction can not really do what a real painting can.

Seeing a Masterpiece, ‘You Feel Life’

I first encountered great paintings at The State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. Many great masters’ paintings are there, and for an impressionable young artist, it was like enter-



Artist Niko Chocheli.

Great paintings look so sincere and almost spontaneous that you feel like they were not hard work to paint at all.

ing a paradise—a garden of Eden.

In my early teens, Rembrandt’s “Return of the Prodigal Son” was a painting that struck me. It is a remarkable painting. When you look at it, you see the father is depicted as blind. He’s old and feeble, and his son has returned home after squandering everything. His father disregards all of his son’s transgressions, his mistakes, and all he wants is to just embrace him and welcome him and say: “Welcome, you were lost and now you’re found.”

The painting is so wonderful, so beautiful, and so warm. You just have to look at the hands of the father; he’s blind, but he feels his son’s shoulders—his son is home. He has his head buried in his father’s chest. It is so powerful and so moving.

This is one thing with great masterpieces: You forget that they are painted. You feel life, you feel the real thing, and you experience it as if you are there.

When artists try to show off their skills and techniques, that’s remarkable, that’s commendable, but it’s not the whole deal. It’s just the beginning. The masters knew how to paint and draw and then tried very hard to hide and remove all the technical things in order to portray real life. That’s why great paintings look so sincere and

“La Lettre ou Les Jeunes” (The Letter or The Young,) by Francisco de Goya.



almost spontaneous that you feel like they were not hard work to paint at all; in reality, it’s very hard work to hide the hard work.

When you stand in front of a masterpiece, you don’t think of the techniques: the brushstrokes, lines, and crosshatching. You look at how well it’s been painted. Of course, it’s all there. But just as in real life, when you look at a person or an object, you don’t look inside of it and its workings. You



“The Return of the Prodigal Son,” circa 1668, by Rembrandt van Rijn. The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

see what strikes you the best and the strongest.

I stood in front of this painting, and I felt I was in front of the real thing.

Awakening to a Neighborhood of Color

I was slightly older when I saw Francisco Goya’s painting “The Young/The Letter,” at The Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow, but still maybe in my mid-teens.

It was an exhibit from the Palace of Fine Arts of Lille in France, which has wonderful great masters’ collections and wonderful Flemish masters like Rubens.

The painting is of a woman reading a letter, with a little attendant holding a big umbrella over the lady’s head. There’s a little dog in front of them, and it looks like washerwomen in the background.

This painting was hung in the center of the exhibition, and what struck me was the black skirt of the woman reading the letter. I’ve never seen anything so powerful. It was so black, and so strong, that all the masterpieces surrounding the painting were put in a kind of shadow; they all looked as if they were fading away. I couldn’t see anything else but this picture.

Of course, as a young and impressionable artist, I wanted to learn how in the world Goya did it. My mind was racing: He had all these pigments; he had all these exceptional traditions and wonderful materials that we’ll probably never have. He probably had the best black in the world.

I went up close to see that black skirt, and how surprised I was: I found every color but black. Black was there, but it

was not predominant. It was dark reds and purples. That’s when I learned what painting was all about in terms of understanding that it’s not one perfect color; it’s a neighborhood. It’s what is next to it that makes a color become what it should be.

The woman’s chest was painted a brilliant white, which, of course, wonderfully contrasts with the black. And the black wonderfully contrasts the white. Everything was, in a way, choreographed together. That’s how this black became so powerful. I said to myself: This is Goya’s secret and how he achieved it. He didn’t have any magical materials; he had wisdom, and that’s when I actually learned what painting is. This glorious painting was a kind of awakening for me.

Painting With Joy

Then there was a big exhibition at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg by The National Gallery in London. I saw a Frans Hals painting of a young man holding a skull. It’s a wonderful painting that’s painted with such flair and such brushwork that it looks like he’s singing. In that painting I saw joy.

That’s when I learned that masters were not just people who sit in dusty old studios and paint serious paintings to scare you off, but they have joy. They love beauty, they celebrate their discoveries, and they are not inhibited by anything.

To find out more about Niko Chocheli’s art and the Chocheli School of Fine Art, visit NikoChocheli.com

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.



Mark Jackson grew up in Spring Valley, N.Y., where he attended a Waldorf school. At Williams College, his professors all suggested he write professionally. He acted professionally for 20 years instead. Now he writes professionally about acting. In the movies.



(L-R) Woody (voiced by Tom Hanks), Buzz Lightyear (voiced by Tim Allen), Jessie (voiced by Joan Cusack), and Forky (voiced by Tony Hale).



Woody (L, voiced by Tom Hanks) takes it upon himself to show Forky (voiced by Tony Hale) why he should embrace being a toy.

These Toys Really ‘R’ Us

MARK JACKSON

Smartphones are wreaking havoc on everything. I walked by a Manhattan playground yesterday; the level of teenage basketball skills nowadays is appalling, due to a smartphone-induced drop in athleticism. Back in the 1970s, forty miles up the Hudson from Manhattan, kids had incredible hoop skills. But it was known that if you came down to the city, you’d get slaughtered by any random kid on any playground, because Manhattan b-ball was vicious. Even junior high

kids played “above the rim.” Now, it’s shocking to witness the severely atrophied level of basketball that goes on, and entirely all across the racial board. Nonathletic youth of all colors and ethnicities, out of shape and with zero coordination, cardio, and skills. Smartphones and tablets are destroying our youth. So it’s refreshing to see, in “Toy Story 4,” that the toys are ensconced in their rightful, traditional, existential capacity of enhancing children’s imaginations. Nary a cellphone in sight. Toys have been with us since the

dawn of time. Toys excavated from the Indus River Valley (3300–1300 B.C.) include small carts, dice and marbles, whistles shaped like birds, and figurines with movable heads, most of which depict cattle. “The Toy Story” franchise has always harkened back to traditional values and simpler times via vintage toys such as “Woody” (voiced by Tom Hanks), a fake toy based on 1950s American children’s preoccupation with cowboys. And the main thing about “Toy Story 4,” among its many wonderful qualities, is that it is hands down the fun-

niest of the entries to date.

Toy Philosophy

“Toy Story 4” continues the tradition with roughly the same 1950s-style toys reprising their roles (like Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head), but it explores more in depth the intrinsic nature of toys. It gets a little bit philosophical on us, sort of, like: Wherefore art we toys? Why doth the toy exist? What be the underlying morality, and, forsooth, the mission of toys? This is why Pixar movies are interesting to adults; they’re jam-packed



ALL PHOTOS BY DISNEY/PIXAR



with insights into the meaning of life, conveyed via toy narrative, a metaphor whereby Toy Story informs Human Story. The fourth installment brings new twists, turns, and archetypal themes. For example, the hands-down star of “Toy Story 4” is Forky, a wee, white plastic utensil (a spork) that the movie’s main child, Bonnie (the latest owner of all the toys), has made on her first day at a kindergarten. Forky’s got two sizes of eyes—those little plastic bubble eyes with black “irises” that swirl around—along with some maroon, fuzzy pipe-cleaner arms and fingers, and some glued-on Popsicle-stick feet, with Bonnie’s name scribbled on the bottom of them. It seems it was the act of naming him that brought Forky to life (“In the beginning was the word”?), but don’t quote me on that because I was laughing too hard to be sharp and discerning. Suffice it to say, Forky lives. And like a child learning to say “Dada,” all Forky’s Silly Putty lips can utter is “Trash!” Why? Because trash is the universe from which Forky came, and so he feels therefore deeply compelled, like

(Top) Forky (voiced by Tony Hale) is not a toy! At least that’s what he thinks. Bonnie created him from supplies Woody retrieved from the kindergarten trash can.

(Above) In Disney and Pixar’s “Toy Story 4,” Buzz, Jessie, and the rest of Bonnie’s toys concoct a plan to find their friends when Woody and Forky go missing. Featuring the voices of Tim Allen, Joan Cusack, Bonnie Hunt, Kristen Schaal, Wallace Shawn, John Ratzenberger, Blake Clark, and Jeff Garlin.

‘Toy Story 4’

Director Josh Cooley
Starring Voices of Tom Hanks, Keanu Reeves, Christina Hendricks, Annie Potts, Tim Allen, Joan Cusack, Tony Hale
Running Time 1 hour, 40 minutes
Rated G
Release Date June 21
★★★★★

a spork version of a salmon swimming upstream, to return there. The many sequences of frenetic hopping, surreptitious dashes, and hellbent-for-trash flailing of Forky’s impassioned attempts to return to the trash (only to be retrieved by his self-appointed guardian, Woody), and the inspired voice-acting with which Tony Hale brings the infant and toddler phases of a spork to life will have you in absolute stitches. **Road Trip!** So, Bonnie’s family takes a road-trip vacation in an RV. But Forky’s not having it. He refuses to be a toy and makes a mad escape out the window. However, Woody vows to keep Bonnie happy and continuously attempts to corral Forky for Bonnie’s play-pleasure. On their extended adventures, Woody, Buzz Lightyear, et al, wind up in an antique shop. A vintage pull-string talking doll named Gabby Gabby (voiced by Christina Hendricks), with beautiful-scary doll eyes, lives there. She’s slightly like Annabelle (the horror-film doll) but basically sweet. However, she’s also got bodyguards—a pack of exorcist-type head-swiveling, zombieified, ventriloquist dummies. Gabby needs a new voice box. Maybe she’ll get her minion dummies to divest Woody of his pull-string voice box. The live-organ-harvesting-related concept, along with those scary dummies, is perhaps a tad grotesque and macabre for kids, but then, Grimm’s Fairy Tales are rather dark too. Then there’s a reunion with Bo Peep and her three-headed sheep. Bo’s broken out on a Hero’s Journey. She’s broken away from the need to belong to a kid. She’s become a “lost toy” (a play on Peter Pan’s Lost Boys, most likely), and likes it that way. Since Woody’s got a major crush on Bo Peep, he finds the concept both daunting and thrilling. What else? There’s a carnival, where we meet the very funny carnival toys Bunny and Ducky (voiced by Jordan Peele and Keegan-Michael Key). And a Canadian version of Evel Knievel: Duke Caboom (voiced by Keanu Reeves). Keanu is currently in the midst of a “Keanussance” and nails this cape-and-Fu-Manchu-stache-

wearing, essentially insecure, stunt-motorcyclist toy, as only Keanu can. **More on Woody’s Mission** Woody’s goal in life—actually any toy’s main hope in life—is to be his or her child’s essential toy. Woody understands the torch has been passed—Forky is Bonnie’s favorite now. But Forky doesn’t want to be a toy; he doesn’t know who the heck he is. And isn’t that kinda like all of us? Most of us don’t know who we are, let alone whether we’re useful, or what our mission in life is, and we think we’re basically trash. Expect to see “I am Forky” T-shirts in the near future. As mentioned, Woody’s new mission is to safeguard Forky. It could be argued that it’s not an entirely selfless act, because it makes him feel useful, but it is nevertheless generated by compassion. Because just like kids have toys, toys also have kids. Bonnie’s now Woody’s kid, and he will make her happy, as he previously did for Andy and Molly, by providing Bonnie with the happiness and sense of accomplishment of having Forky to play with. It’s a great lesson of selflessness and service, for children. **The Next Stage** Traditionally, when Greek girls came of age, part of their rite of passage to adulthood was to sacrifice their childhood toys to the gods; 14-year-old girls, on their wedding nights, would offer up their dolls in a temple. In the end, “Toy Story 4” segues to the concept of children outgrowing toys and toys outgrowing children, by giving Woody a choice. It’s the classic Hero’s Journey call to adventure. Woody is confronted with Bo Peep’s “lost toy” status. Should he stay in the “safe” confines of his child’s bedroom? Or should he heed the call and follow his bliss? But isn’t his bliss taking care of his child? It would appear that Bo Peep is also his bliss. What to do ... what to do. What you should do, is go see Woody decide what to do. Very rewarding. And your kids will be more than happy to leave their cellphones off for the entirety of the tale. Maybe afterward, they’ll even feel like shooting a few baskets.

THEATER REVIEW

Can Family Unity Prevail Over Gender Identity?



ALL PHOTOS BY JAMES LEVINE

JANI ALLAN

NEW YORK—A production by Primary Stages now at the Cherry Lane Theatre is perfect for an audience needing introduction to the notion that individuals who are evolving spiritually will overcome personal differences and forsake their egos for the sake of family unity. “Little Women,” by Louisa May Alcott, is a semi-autobiographical novel about four sisters growing up in Massachusetts during the Civil War era. It is now a play written by Kate Hamill, whose dramatic versions of other classics like “Sense and Sensibility” and “Vanity Fair” have been successful. “Little Women” certainly could not be more timely given its color-blind casting, and more importantly, its reference to gender identity.



(Top) The March family: (L-R) Meg (Kate Hamill), Jo (Kristolyn Lloyd), Marmie (Maria Elena Ramirez), Beth (Paola Sanchez Abreu), and Amy (Carmen Zilles) in Primary Stages’ production of Kate Hamill’s “Little Women.” (Above) Laurie (Nate Mann) and Jo (Kristolyn Lloyd) in “Little Women,” now at the Cherry Lane Theatre.

‘Little Women’
Cherry Lane Theatre
38 Commerce St.
New York
Tickets 212-352-3101 or PrimaryStages.org
Running Time 2 hours, 15 minutes (one intermission)
Closes June 29

cardinal virtues—prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice—will prevail. In this sense, “Little Women” is a reminder that our culture’s social character needs overhauling. We need to examine what it means to be wise, moral, courageous, and moderate. **A Gender-Lite Version** The play focuses on Jo March (Kristolyn Lloyd), an aspiring novelist. Rather like the French author Colette, Jo is keen on capsizing traditional gender roles and yearns for a future where she can be something other than that which society expects of her. Jo believes that were she in trousers and tailcoat, she’d make her way through Europe and make a name for herself in the bargain. She’d “become Shakespeare and Dickens and Thackeray.” Laurie (Nate Mann), short for his last name, Laurence, is the boy next door and also fascinated by gender identity. He imagines a world where there is neither “boy” or “girl” nor “gentleman” or “lady.” But unlike the current national and political division on gender identity that seems to have overtaken all other concerns, in “Little Women” tradition triumphs radicalism. Jo ends up married to Professor Bhaer, a German-language instructor, and Laurie’s happily-ever-after is with Amy (Carmen Zilles), the youngest March.

Some Background Alcott prefaced “Little Women” with an excerpt from John Bunyan’s 17th-century work “The Pilgrim’s Progress,” an allegorical novel about leading a Christian life. Her novel begins with the four March girls—Meg, Jo, Beth, and Amy—sitting in their living room, lamenting their poverty. When their mother, Marmie, comes home with a letter from Mr. March, the girls’ father who is serving as a chaplain in the Civil War, the letter inspires the girls to bear their burdens more cheerfully and not to complain about their poverty. What does society want them to be? Are they at ease with the roles foisted on them? What does it mean to be grown up? The dramas of the March family and the ways they are resolved are deeply instructive. The March siblings tussle with perennial themes: jealousy, insecurity, rejection, and resentments. But the family that upholds the four

A Loss of Priorities When Alcott was writing in the late 19th century, the gender identity issue was perhaps no more than a prescient cloud, the size of one’s fist, on the horizon. How could Alcott have known that national identity, patriotism, border security—all would seem to be of less import these days than “gender equality”? Why, the Bill of Rights has paled

into insignificance. In its place there are strident demands for the recognition of “gender fluidity,” militantly enforced multiculturalism, and a destruction of the nation’s traditions and history. Indeed, the fascism of the gender fluidity movement is eroding the freedoms that were taken for granted during the Civil War. America was a country founded because of a need for religious freedoms. It is deeply ironic that the freedom most deemed worth defending today is the freedom to decide what sex one wants to be.

A family that upholds the four cardinal virtues—prudence, temperance, fortitude, and justice—will prevail.

A Fresh Production Sarna Lapine’s brisk staging plays like a best-of reel of the lives of the March family, a clever device given the sprawling nature of the book. Kristolyn Lloyd’s performance as Jo has depth and nuance, and Nate Mann as Laurie gives a marvelously persuasive performance. The production is authentic and fresh. In fact, the sexual identity issues are gender-lite in comparison to the cartoon that is playing out in this country today. Thus, the play is not the “radical adaptation” it professes to be in a program note. In fact, hats off to Hamill for honoring the traditions that made this country great.

Jani Allan is a South African journalist, columnist, writer, and broadcaster.

FILM REVIEW

A Captivating, Earnest Portrayal of Overnight-Shift Workers

IAN KANE

Director Thomas Stuber’s slow-moving drama “In the Aisles” opens with a bizarre scene of forklifts dancing to the classic Austrian waltz “The Blue Danube,” as the red and orange of dawn drifts into bright daylight. Ever-present florescent lights illuminate the wide aisles of a big box store, the kind that seem to permeate most developed countries these days, in a small town in Germany. Later, when the store finally belches forth its last customers, a bedraggled-looking character named Rudi (Andreas Leupold, “Lola and Billy the Kid”) says “Welcome to the night” (spoken in German with English subtitles). The music then switches over to something a little more melancholic: Samuel Barber’s “Adagio for Strings.” The measured, surreal way in which these opening scenes are shot is indicative of how the rest of the movie flows. Stuber takes his time setting up not only the careful composition of the film’s world (executed gracefully by cinematographer Peter Matjasko, “A Heavy Heart”) but also the quirky characters who inhabit it. One of those characters is Christian (definitely played by Franz Rogowski, “Transit”) and soon in the upcoming Cannes contender: Terrence Malick’s “A Hidden Life”). He gets up in the afternoons to head to his graveyard shift at a sprawling big box store. His rather dingy, cramped apartment, brooding affections, and heavily tattooed body possibly allude to a bad-boy past and willingness to try for a better life. Christian is a newbie at the gigantic, now darkened store, and we are soon introduced to some of the other odd characters. The grumpy senior supervisor known simply as

Bruno (Peter Kurth, “A Heavy Heart,” “Babylon Berlin”) who oversees the booze department, takes a liking to the quiet Christian and takes him under his wing. However, just like at any workplace, the store has its own set of rules. Early on, Christian gets warned about his exposed tattoos. He is taken to the side and, in a hilarious scene reminiscent of a soldier being prepared for the battlefield, is issued a proper, long-sleeved work smock, official name tag, pens, and other equipment before being sent forth into the “hallowed halls” of the store. These rules apply mainly to newbies like Christian, as we see such things as Bruno having extended breaks with the pharmacy director. As far as they see things, the older veterans just don’t get paid enough to move too fast or work too hard, just hard enough to get the job done—at some point, that is. There are also various factions within the place. As a stocker, Christian is guided down the superstore’s dreary, generic aisles by Bruno, who, during Christian’s probationary period, checks off various passing grades every time Christian performs his duties to his supervisor’s satisfaction. These duties mainly consist of loading large containers of food and beverages and transporting them from one huge shelf to another. During one such nocturnal sortie, Bruno explains to Christian how departments interrelate: “We don’t get along with canned goods,” Bruno says in a serious tone. “With sweets, we’re fine.” Soon, Christian makes contact with the sweets aisle manager, fittingly named “Sweets Marion” (played by Sandra Hüller, “Finsterworld,” “Re-

quiem”). Whenever the two happen to stock shelves together, or their coffee breaks happen to coincide, they begin to reveal subtle clues into each other’s private lives. Soon, Marion is flirting with Christian, but Bruno believes that she will lead him astray from taking his job seriously and training for the all-important forklift driver certification. **Sincere Filmmaking** If this had been a large-budget Hollywood production, I suspect this film would have featured little animals being shot out of devices, fart jokes, and sappy, contrived romance scenes. Instead of focusing on Christian and Marion, though, we are treated to a masterclass in sincerity in filmmaking, as expressed through a plethora of performances that feel earnest and real. In fact, the characters were so well wrought here and convincing that I would have loved to have seen them in some sort of recurring TV drama where we could get more insight into each of them. There’s a quiet sadness exhibited by the “semi-skilled” folks working “In the Aisles.” However, this is underscored in the overarching message of having a simple sense of pride in performing a job—no matter how mundane and repetitive—to the best of one’s ability. It is a subtle celebration of the concept of the “work family,” or the forming of meaningful bonds through the virtue of work, no matter how myopic that work may seem.



(Top) Peter Kurth (L) and Franz Rogowski in “In the Aisles.” (Above) Sandra Hüller and Franz Rogowski in “In the Aisles.”
Director Thomas Stuber
Starring Franz Rogowski, Sandra Hüller, Peter Kurth, Andreas Leupold, Michael Specht
Running Time 2 hours, 5 minutes
Not Rated
Release Date June 14
★★★★★

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Ancient Chinese Stories

Great Achievements Begin With Small Steps

EPOCH TIMES STAFF

Start by Sweeping Your Own House

“The Book of the Later Han,” which covers Han Dynasty history from A.D. 6 to 189, has a story about a proud chap named Chen Fan. Chen was ambitious and wanted to achieve great things, but he didn’t bother keeping his own life in order. As a result, his room was constantly filthy and chaotic.

One day, Xue Qin, a friend of Chen’s father, came to visit. When he saw how dirty Chen’s room was, he asked Chen, “Why don’t you clean up your room?”

Chen replied, “As a man of great ambition, why should I waste time on trivial things like sweeping my room, when I should be focusing on sweeping the world off its feet?”

Xue Qin mused, “How can one achieve great things when one can’t even keep his living space clean?” His remark left Chen speechless.

‘A Journey of 1,000 Miles Begins With a Single Step’

Ancient Chinese philosopher Laozi once said: “A massive tree—so wide that it takes two men to wrap their arms around it—began as a tiny sapling. A nine-story pagoda began as a pile of dirt on its foundation. A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.”

In his book “Wei Xue” (“To Learn”), Qing Dynasty writer Peng Duanshu tells the story of a rich monk and a poor monk who lived in Sichuan Province in southwestern China. Both wanted to make the pilgrimage across the South

Sea to India to pay their respects to Buddha.

The rich monk said to the poor monk: “I’ve tried for several years to hire a ship to sail across the sea. My plans have yet to reach fruition. What do you have to rely on for making the trip?”

A year later, the rich monk still hadn’t left his home, while the poor monk had already returned from his pilgrimage. The poor monk told the surprised rich monk, “Throughout my journey, I relied only on my water bottle and begging bowl. They were all I needed to fulfill my wish.”

The poor monk achieved his goal by taking one step at a time, relying only on courage and will. By contrast, the rich monk held on to his dream like a castle in the air, talking about his aspirations but failing to act. Their different mindsets produced quite different outcomes.

Leveling Vast Mountains

The Taoist text “Liezi” tells a story about Yu Gong, age 90, who leveled two mountains by sheer faith and perseverance.

Yu Gong lived near two mountains on the north bank of the Yellow River. They were over 700 miles wide and several thousand feet high. People traveling to or from the river had to take a long detour around the mountains.

After years of witnessing this, Yu Gong finally decided that the only solution was to move the mountains. He and three sons and grandsons went to the mountains to break up the stones and dig up the earth. They then transported the stones and earth to the banks

of the Bohai Sea.

Zhi Sou, who lived on the river bend, laughed at Yu Gong. “With such minuscule manpower, how can you hope to level two mountains?”

Yu Gong replied: “Even after I’ve passed on, my sons will continue this work. They will have grandsons, who will have great-grandsons. My family will always have future generations to carry on, while these mountains won’t grow any bigger. They will be leveled one day. What have I to worry about?”

Zhi Sou was at a loss for words. Despite his advanced age and limited strength, Yu Gong had no doubt that his lofty goal would be attainable with steady, continuous efforts.

Indeed, his faith and determination touched the Heavenly God, who instructed mighty deities to help him move the mountains. From then on, travelers could reach the Yellow River without any obstruction.

Grave Defeats Begin With Minor Flaws

In daily life, our minor habits and thoughts are not insignificant. Those that are positive have a good chance of helping us ultimately fulfill our goals. Similarly, those that are bad can magnify and multiply over time, manifesting as grave consequences in the end.

“Shi Ji” (“Records of the Grand Historian”), completed around 94 B.C. by early Han Dynasty official Sima Qian, recorded that King Zhou, the last king of the Shang Dynasty (about 1556–1046 B.C.), once received a pair of ivory chopsticks that he adored.

Seeing this, his adviser Qi Zi sighed and said, “The more the king cares about these chopsticks, the more he might think they can only be paired with bowls made of rhino horn and cups made of white jade.

“With such fine wares, he will want them to hold only the best delicacies. Being used to such delicacies, he will desire only the most expensive silk robes and majestic palaces.

“The luxuries within our borders will eventually prove insufficient, and the king will wish to acquire rare, exquisite items from other countries. From these chopsticks, I can already see what will unfold. I can’t help but worry for the king.”

Qi Zi’s prediction indeed came true. King Zhou’s fancies grew and grew. He abandoned his duties and indulged in luxuries and drunken orgies. He levied heavy taxes to build opulent residences with pools of wine and forests of meat. He thus lost the people’s respect and support, leading to the Shang Dynasty’s overthrow.

After his defeat, King Zhou set fire to his palace and treasures and committed suicide by throwing himself into the flames.

Instead of curbing his desires while they were still small, King Zhou let his greed swell untamed. What was once a minor flaw became a major catastrophe, which ultimately cost him his kingdom and his life. His story conveys an important lesson: One would be wise to constantly reflect upon and rectify one’s shortcomings before they turn into serious issues or even disasters.

In daily life, our minor habits and thoughts are not insignificant.



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