

Samuel Beckett with hope & sequins from another planet—welcome to fall theater season



Samuel Beckett, the man—always

By Matthew Love September 25, 2009

Here and there, in a 30-seat house or a Broadway behemoth, the new shows of New York's fall theater season stand up to reveal themselves. But before any have had opening nights, reviews, or even previews, *The A.V. Club* trundled through the next three months of proposed stage traffic in an attempt to guess some of the most promising productions of the season.

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To Swoon Or Not To Swoon

A Steady Rain

It would be ridiculous not to begin with the most conspicuous subject of cocktail-party chatter: a show starring the Hunky Hunks of Hunksville, Daniel Craig and Hugh Jackman, and going by the title *A Steady Rain*. Playwright Keith Huff has spent most of his life as a writer hammering away at a career in Chicago.



Hugh Jackman

Appropriately, *A Steady Rain* revolves around two Chicago cops coming apart at the seams, with the star actors in roles that can't be just a vanity project. Here's hoping Craig and Jackman can delve into the darkness enough to make this production live up to its well-reviewed runs in the Midwest. **(Now playing—Schoenfeld Theatre, 236 W 45th St)**

Othello

Philip Seymour Hoffman may be adept and comfortable humanizing shlumps and losers, but he's also a methodical craftsman who knows which characters drive plays and thrill audiences. (Hint for this one: It ain't *Othello*.) Hoffman plays Iago, John Ortiz plays Othello, and LAByrinth Theatre Company members fill out the rest of the ensemble. Director Peter Sellars should give the material a woolly, contemporary spin, but it's Hoffman who excites the most, as he sets out to take on the cerebral machinations and manipulations of one of literature's best villains. **(Now playing—Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, 566 LaGuardia Pl)**

Long-Awaited Transmissions From Canada. Space

Vigil

Morris Panych may well be the patron saint of Canadian theater: He's a prolific director, actor, and widely produced playwright who has won every major award up north, and his plays are most often dark comedies that wring laughs out of their bleak circumstances—think Samuel Beckett with hope. Take *Vigil*, now finally making its way to New York for an Off-Broadway production at DR2 in Union Square: A man named Kemp uproots his little life to visit an aunt who is infirm and dying. "Let's not talk about anything depressing," says Kemp, before asking "Do you want to be cremated?" It continues with gamely misanthropy, at one point including a homemade suicide machine, until a revelation alters the nature of the play's central relationship. **(In previews 9/20—DR2 Theatre, 103 E 15th St)**



Kenneth Lonergan

Starry Messenger

It's exciting to see the long-postponed Kenneth Lonergan play *Starry Messenger* finally land. To recap: Lonergan has a stunning ear for naturalistic dialogue—see his play *Lobby Hero* or *You Can Count On Me*, the film he wrote and directed—that he employs to earn your sympathy and break your heart. He's been friends with Matthew Broderick for a long time, and Broderick has been signed on to play the central character, a lonely astronomer, for years. For whatever reason, it just hasn't happened. But some of Lonergan's other friends at the New Group have provided the stage for him to direct, and the only appropriate sentiment is: Finally, finally! **(In previews 10/24—The New Group, 410 W 42nd St)**

A Body's Potent Poignancy

In the Next Room (Or The Vibrator Play)

There's a reason Sarah Ruhl is one of the hottest playwrights going at the moment: She's wonderful. Her writing is lyrical and fanciful yet articulate and insightful; her characters slip over the slim partition between tragedy and comedy in sometimes just a word. This fall, Ruhl is poised to expand her audience even further as she makes her Broadway debut with *In the Next Room*. The play is a corseted reclamation of the female orgasm, based on a Victorian-era notion that a female "hysteria" could be calmed by doctors occasionally masturbating their patients. Les Waters, who helped anchor Ruhl's whimsy in her adaptation of *Eurydice*, here reshapes the play's initial Berkeley Rep production. Thankfully, the resources allow for a great cast led by Michael Cerveris and Laura Benanti. **(In previews 10/22—Lyceum Theatre, 149 W 45th St)**

Let Me Down Easy

Years before productions like *The Laramie Project* or *Exonerated*, Anna Deavere-Smith was constructing shows based on word-for-word transcripts or tapes of interviews she'd conducted with people across the U.S. Once she's transformed her subjects into characters, she steps onstage and readily shifts between them, often making salient points about communication in American culture. While most of her work has been focused on race relations, the new *Let Me Down Easy* is about the body and its failures. Deavere-Smith is a virtuoso performer with a keen eye for detail, so it will be riveting to watch her play both her mother and Lance Armstrong within a half hour. **(Now playing—Second Stage Theatre, 307 W 43rd St)**

Experimental Extravaganzas

Idiot Savant

If there's one show that stands to make good on the promise of a "wild theatrical odyssey," it's one involving Richard Foreman. The godfather of experimental theater would probably never write that himself, of course, but as *Idiot Savant* is a rare co-production with the Public Theater, some things are likely out of his maniacal mitts. The aim of Foreman's kind of theater is not about pleasure or catharsis so much as an overload of the circuits—once the mind's standard defenses have succumbed to all the finely detailed stage pictures, video projections, staccato choreography, and barrage of sound effects, it quietly surrenders to Foreman forever after. The great Willem Dafoe is on board to aid in the process, doing the sort of project he loves best. Will it be the master's last stage production? Don't risk it—just go. **(Opens 10/27—The Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St)**



Richard Foreman

The Lily's Revenge

The fierce and fabulous performance artist Taylor Mac is not a drag queen; he's more like a sequin-sealed being from another planet. With his ukulele, a booming voice, and stage presence to burn, Mac has been building his audiences and flexing his muscles as a playwright over the last few years, but he has yet to attempt anything of the size and scale of *The Lily's Revenge*. A five-part, five-hour epic featuring 40 performers and five directors, *Revenge* will take over the HERE Arts Center in a flurry of dance, vaudeville, and Japanese Noh that will spill into the theater's lobbies. The story, about an uprooted flower out to kill the King of Nostalgia, is a reaction to legislation prohibiting gay marriage. But Mac has always made his political writing conversational, with a clear window into the personal. **(Opens 10/29—HERE Arts Center, 145 6th Ave)**