

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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DANIEL'S HUSBAND



Photo by Ed Krieger

Fountain Theatre

After reviewing theatre in Los Angeles for the past 32 years, I have my share of memories of some difficult assignments I've stumbled through over that period of time. Usually, that difficulty involves having less-than glowing things to say about people I admire and love. After attending the opening night of the Fountain's SoCal premiere of Michael McKeever's off-Broadway hit *Daniel's Husband*, however, this is only the second time in my reviewing history that I almost opted to not write about the production.

If it were not for my pal Maya Lynne Robinson, my gorgeous "date" for the evening, I might not be sitting here composing this. Maya told me I must write about it, if only for the cathartic aspect of doing the deed and, when it was done, she reasoned, I could decide whether to publish it or not. As I write this, that conclusion is still quite up in the air for me; you, the reader, now know better than I do what my decision turned out to be.

If I had known where *Daniel's Husband* "goes," I probably would have opted not to attend. To say the storyline is agonizingly close to home for me would be a major, major understatement. Dealing with a longterm relationship between two guys completely and committedly in love who find life's little emotional butcher knife thrusts between the ribs do not often escape their world is a scenario I know only too well.

In McKeever's play, Daniel (Bill Brochtrup) longs to be married to Mitchell (Tim Cummings), his partner of seven years, something his mate is equally adamant to avoid. Having shared my life with my Victor for 50 years next November, the difference for us was that neither of us wanted to make our union official despite the acceptance and legalization of same-sex marriage, both feeling as Mitchell does that marriage is just a piece of paper that tells our greedy government and equally greedy vendors of goods who we are and gives them the freedom to know how to tax and to market to us.

McKeever, a Floridian who had to rewrite his play after marriage laws changed in his state, presents Mitchell's argument clearly, that as a gay man he relishes being different and loves not being seen by the world as normal. I remember, at a very young age, my mother half-joking to me that she knew I would be a lifelong rebel because I was only attracted to black girls and white boys—and she was right. It wasn't a matter of what was between someone's legs for me, but instead it was a matter of being electrified doing anything and everything society and religious dogma told me was wrong.

For Daniel and Mitchell, the argument between them about the future of their relationship becomes quite a surprise about a third of the way through McKeever's tale. Although his dialogue is quick and hilariously clever, his play at first appeared to me to be a sitcom-y modern amalgam of Neil Simon crossed with Mart Crowley—that is until things suddenly turned serious.

As someone who has never been much of a fan of gay-oriented humor, especially in a story depicting a perfect, successful same-sex couple hosting their friend and his newest squeeze in their perfect Tarak and Christina-inspired home and serving Daniel's perfect crème brulee to their guests after his perfect dinner, I at first found the play extremely disappointing.

Despite a dynamic cast honed to razor-sharpness by director Simon Levy, jokes about Tallulah Bankhead and dating boys in junior high school whose worldview could only be based on watching *The Real Housewives of Orange County*, McKeever's look into the lives of these modern-day boys without a band started to get old for me purdydurn quick—that is until Mitchell starts expounding heatedly to his friend Barry's (Ed F. Martin) cradle-robbed new love interest Trip (Jose Fernando) the reasons he does not believe in gay marriage. Although both his lover and the kid see it as a way two people can show the world they're committed to one another, Mitchell sees it as a means to pacify "insipid queens' desperate need to assimilate."

If this sudden turn in the storyline were not jarring enough, especially after a weeklong visit from Daniel's Auntie Mame-ish and glaringly self-centered nightmare of a mother Lydia (Jenny O'Hara), McKeever's surprises are not over yet. It's obvious and incredibly sweet how much Daniel and Mitchell adore one another, but is it enough when they are thrust into a medical crisis that could potentially end their idyllic existence, especially when, if they had indeed been legally married, the trauma and heartache they are soon forced to try to overcome would not have been an issue?

Even though at first one might think *Daniel's Husband* is going to be all about crème brulee and the issue of multigenerational relationships, those topics soon fade into dust and the last third of the play is guaranteed to leave you moved and emotionally exhausted, albeit in a gorgeously lyrical way.

Brochtrup, O'Hara, and Levy's knockout supporting players are uniformly exceptional and quite stunning throughout, turning on a dime from playing an updated version of Harold and Emory blowing out the birthday candles to ripping the heart out of anyone in attendance. O'Hara is a special standout as a character who so easily could slip into Cruella DeVil-ville stereotypical behavior without her ability to make Lydia seem human, someone who genuinely believes she is not the villain of the story.

Yet it is Cummings who, under the extremely passionate leadership of Levy, delivers one of the most indelible performances of a man in pain that anyone could possibly imagine, culminating in a harrowing confrontational scene between he and O'Hara that is the stuff awards are made to honor. It is simply the performance of a lifetime from an actor who, despite my once bashing him quite ruthlessly in a review at this same theatre, has given us a plethora of brilliant performances over the ensuing years.

Levy's direction is incredibly in tune to the rhythms of McKeever's play, which in itself is surely destined to be a classic in the annals of contemporary gay drama. DeAnne Mallais' impressively and elegantly appointed set is a welcome addition, as are the contributions of Levy's crackerjack team of designers.

It's always a tad earthshattering when a play seems to be written about things one personally has experienced and here is where I fell apart. Spoiler alert: if you don't want what I hope will be carefully constructed hints about the twists of *Daniel's Husband*, stop reading now.

Although I've shared my life since 1969 in a fiercely committed bond guaranteed to last for whatever time Victor and I have left together, he and I have not shared a bedroom or an intimate relationship except for the first 12 years of our past half-century together. This made the idea of us being married not a consideration, especially since we were both philosophically opposed to the idea for many, many years—and now that I have been involved in my own whirlwind life-changing May-December love affair with someone 42 years my junior for nearly as long as Daniel and Mitchell have been together, that made it even less of a possibility for us.

When Victor was first diagnosed with early Alzheimer's disease in 2001 (not the medical issue in the play, by the way), the stakes changed drastically. As I battled my own sixth bout with the dreaded Big C, I knew it was time. Despite my love for Hugh, who by the way helps me immensely in my daily quest to care for and keep Victor at home for as long as possible, I knew the idea of marriage was no longer governed by our political and religious rebelliousness but had to be about our commitment to one another. For me, it was about making decisions about his care and for him, it was essential he was covered if anything took me away from continuing to hang on for dear life as this risky planet spins around the sun at breakneck speed.

Victor and I were married in Las Vegas in December, 2016 after nearly 48 years living together while the patient, understanding person who has revealed himself to be the true and undying love of my life stayed at home in LA to watch our dogs, his sainted acceptance of my situation a testament to our feelings for one another despite the oddities *or* the odds.

A character in *Daniel's Husband* tells another whose well-meaning attempts to comfort eventually become an irritant that the person has no idea "how hard it is to keep up a good front these days," particularly when waking each morning he quietly checks to see if the sleeping lump of a person with whom he has chosen to spend his life is still breathing. I know that routine only too well and, hearing it delivered in McKeever's tender, thought-provoking masterpiece nearly did me in.

I'm still not sure if my camaraderie with these characters was due to my own situation in life, but I suspect it's more universal than that. *Daniel's Husband* is a tribute to committing oneself to love and life, written by a splendid wordsmith and assayed by a brilliant team of designers and players who tenderly make a plea for us all to be kinder and more conscientious of who we are in the world if we care enough to try to leave it a better place.

THROUGH JUNE 23: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Av., LA. [323.663.1525](tel:323.663.1525) or www.fountaintheatre.com
