

The Pilot Who Crashed the Party



Photo by Jenny Graham

Broadwater Theatre

Some people spent their time doing time during the pandemic planting herb gardens, some took yoga classes on Zoom, some (I wonder whom?) churned out more paintings than Margaret Keane back when she was locked in her basement, but for actor/writer/director/improvisationist extraordinaire Paul Sand, about to embark on his tenth decade observing the world through the seductively skewed lens of comedy, he wrote his first full-length play.

Now two years later, the world premiere of the classic overachiever's delightfully silly farce *The Pilot Who Crashed the Party* dives nose-first directly into the Broadwater with its 91-year-old playwright doubling as director.

It's as though Joe Orton has channeled Agatha Christie in Sand's clever send-up of melodramatic 1930s drawing room mysteries when a pilot crashes his small plane into the Santa Monica Mountains hilltop home of Sally (LA theatrical goddess Jacqueline Wright) during a violent rainstorm, interrupting the international socialite's 50th birthday celebration.

The pilot (Sol Mason) staggers into the home and collapses, waking only to profess to those gathered that he has no idea who he is or why he would even be piloting a plane. Stuck in the home as a river of mud keeps those gathered

from leaving and robbed of phone service, the eclectic group of party guests insist on not letting the man sleep for fear if he does he could lapse into a coma.

Each person has his or her own vision of who the man is, what his real agenda might be, and how his presence relates to them personally—and here lies the heart of the complex and convoluted mystery filled with delightfully overdramatic and bizarre twists and turns. It's like *Mark of the Vampire* meets *Dinner at Eight* directed by Todd Browning as projection designer Fritz Davis' animated rain and lightning relentlessly descend down as the actors valiantly work toward chewing Jeff G. Rack's suitably elegant yet minimalist scenery. It's almost a shame it can't be presented in black and white.

As onstage musicians Yennie Lam and Chris Rorrer as the duo Sally has hired to play for her party enhance the proceedings on violin and cello, occasionally leaving their chairs to follow one character or another around the stage while still continuously playing, their accompaniment morphs from classical to eerily histrionic to help the seriously necromantic tale unfold. Soon Sand's rapid twists and turns and Marx Brothers-inspired physical comedy sensibilities heighten the storyline and those nagging questions surrounding the pilot's identity—and possible more sinister mission—become curiouser and curiouser.

When it comes to physical comedy, no one could possibly match Wright, who may be one of the bravest and most outrageously unfiltered performers ever to set foot upon a stage. Her Sally is the force that pilots this *Pilot*, delivering a performance of which no one else on this planet, save possibly Jennifer Coolidge or the ghost of Madeline Kahn, could get away with. Picture maybe an old '30s B-movie with Joan Blondell cast in a role originally written for Gale Sondergaard.

The problem here is that, with the exception of Claudia Ferri as Sally's diva-like Italian movie star best friend, no one else quite gets the concept and the result is as though Wright and Ferri are in one play and the rest are cast in another. Leaving Wright out there performing a nearly one-person show is rather unfair to her; it's testament to her unique abilities how courageously she ignores the unevenness of her supporting performances.

Although surely there's something to say for Pinteresque pauses in such material, the dialogue is often delivered so slowly and leisurely that one might wonder if one of the actors has forgotten his or her lines, which is a distinct possibility during the performance I attended since an understudy was appearing as one of the major characters for the first time.

Mason gets a huge pass as the often nebbishy pilot, who appropriately plays the straightman foil to Wright's Lylah Clare and does so perfectly. If it seems he could both physically and in performance choices resemble a contemporary version of the young Paul Sand himself, it might not be so farfetched since I understand he has been working with the man on projects for the last decade or so.

Whatever the problems, however, *The Pilot Who Crashed the Party* is great diversionary fun and a tribute to the comic genius and resilience of Mr. Sand, whom I have idolized personally since I was a working kid in Chicago theatre and he was a mainstay of the groundbreaking Second City, a place blocks from my late teen home at Lincoln Park West and Menominee that I frequented often and where I took classes that were a highlight in my own evolution as an actor and writer. His newest effort is not to be missed, especially starring the indomitable Jacqueline Wright, who should be preserved in Webster's under the entry "One of a Kind."

THROUGH MAY 7: Broadwater Theatre Mainstage, 6320 Santa Monica Blvd., Hollywood.
www.onstage411.com/Pilot