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Critic's Notebook

In Selfish Sons and Trolls, Swollen Egos Stride the Stage

By Charles Isherwood

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LOUISVILLE, Ky. — How exactly do we become the people we are? That knotty question hovered in the air at the Humana Festival of New American Plays at the Actors Theater here. The most intriguing works in the festival, now under the direction of Les Waters, take the audience on engrossing journeys through the thick underbrush of the human psyche as it is shaped by family, society and the divided impulses of the self.

“Gnit,” Will Eno’s impish adaptation of “Peer Gynt,” set the inquisitive tone. The script describes the play as a “rough translation” of Ibsen’s epic dramatic poem, which is rarely staged because of its imposing length and its multiplicity of locales, from Norway to the kingdom of the trolls to Morocco and Egypt. Reams of lyrical monologue and sometimes obscure philosophy are probably equally to blame for its status as a landmark of modern theater that even avid theatergoers hardly ever get a chance to see.

Mr. Eno has studied the play closely, and the marvel of his new version is how closely it tracks the original while also being, at every moment and unmistakably, a Will Eno play. Enophiles (I guess I could be called the head of the local chapter) will delight in how snugly Ibsen’s peculiar drama accommodates Mr. Eno’s flair for playing games with language and his offbeat humor, which cuts to the heart as incisively as it tickles the funny bone.

The first line, croaked in an offhand drawl by the mother of the protagonist, Peter Gnit (“a typo,” he shrugs at one point), is quintessential Eno. Stranded bedridden in her cabin in the woods, Peter’s mother glumly says, “Never have children.” Then she adds in the same dour tone: “Or, I don’t know, have children. Either way you end up talking to yourself.”

Portrayed with acidic humor by Linda Kimbrough, Peter’s mother doesn’t get too much time to soliloquize because her son is such a teller of tall tales. “Maybe if I’d let you babble more when you were a baby, you wouldn’t still be babbling now,” she says with a sigh as he regales her with another shaggy dog story.

But Peter, played with a nice combination of smugness and sincerity by Dan Waller, is soon off chasing after his destiny — chasing his own tail, really — as he lights out for adventure with

little regard for his mother's welfare or anyone else's. As in Ibsen's original Peter leads a life driven by allegiance to the idea of fulfilling himself — whoever he may turn out to be.

He runs off with a bride intended for another, then abandons her with nary a qualm because he's mooning over his real love, Solvay (Hannah Bos). He also takes up briefly with the seductive daughter of a real-estate tycoon (the two stand in for Ibsen's trolls, a delicious touch), and in trying to escape from their clutches he encounters a mysterious voice (Ibsen's Boyg) who reflects back to Peter his own watery consciousness.

Throughout "Gnit" Mr. Eno gently joshes about the weirdness of Ibsen's play while also whittling away its excesses to bring forth its resonant ideas about the destructiveness of self-interest, often disguised as the nobler sounding "being true to yourself."

"Gnit" loses steam in the final going: Ibsen's last act has been condensed too much for my taste. The crucial figure of the Button-Molder, who threatens to steal the hero's soul and melt it together with those of many others who have neither sinned greatly nor nobly shone, is essentially eliminated. Still, what's striking about "Gnit," superbly directed by Mr. Waters and featuring a hilarious turn by Danny Wolohan as several whole groups of characters, is that after climbing the craggy peaks of Ibsen's daunting play Mr. Eno has brought down from its dizzying heights a surprisingly crowd-pleasing (if still strange) work.