

WHEEL OF FIRE

Adam Bock on a family catastrophe.

BY JOHN LAHR

The curtain comes up on Adam Bock's "A Small Fire" (directed by Trip Cullman, at Playwrights Horizons) as Emily Bridges (the astringent Michele Pawk), the play's no-nonsense, blue-jeaned heroine, barks orders at her employees on a construction site. "That's bullshit," she says, dressing down her foreman, Billy (Victor Williams). "You know I fucking expect better from you." "Slang in a woman's mouth is not obscene, it only sounds so," Mark Twain joked. Emily's potty mouth announces her as a phallic woman. She isn't just one of the guys; to all extents and purposes, she *is* a guy. Everything about her demeanor, from her bombast to her use of her BlackBerry, broadcasts macho command. She is a prickly, tough broad, used to kicking ass and taking names.

Emily wears a hard hat; she also has a hard heart, which is revealed by degrees in the first scene. Billy has to talk her out of firing a worker who has serious family problems. She makes it clear that she's not happy about her daughter's choice of a wedding menu: "Jenny wanted duck and sea bass. With red-pepper coulis. I wanted prime rib." To Billy, with whom she has a collegial intimacy, she mocks her husband's desire to lay in provisions for "disaster preparedness." ("No one is going to bomb Connecticut!") When her husband calls to tell her about a cute cat that needs a home, she dismisses him curtly. "No, John. . . . No. . . . We don't want a cat. . . . O.K. Bye." In her eyes, it's clear, John is the pussy.

When we finally see John (the emollient Reed Birney), at home with Emily, he acts like a compassionate extra in Em-

ily's epic, bringing her coffee, massaging her feet, trying to calm her mean-spirited fuss. She doesn't approve of her future son-in-law, Henry, an importer of cheese, and she has let her daughter know it. "Isn't it enough we're paying for the wedding? I don't want to give them anything else. I don't want her to marry him," she says, adding later, "Jenny'll

*Keenan-Bolger, Birney, and Pawk as a family coming apart.*

marry him . . . and she'll be disappointed but by the time she realizes she's made a mistake she'll be too far in or she'll be pregnant or . . . And she won't be able to get out." "Are you talking about them?" John replies, opening up a Pandora's box of buried feelings, which the pragmatic Emily avoids. Eventually, we learn that Emily had wanted to leave John. "You

should have left her," Jenny (Celia Keenan-Bolger) tells her beloved dad. "You might have found out you were better off." But he's a passive guy; he needs Emily's noisy presence to fill his own emptiness. "I'm lucky she didn't like being alone because I can't. I can't be," he tells Jenny. "Be terrible for me if she left."

Now, instead of leaving John, Emily begins to vanish in plain sight. "How do we behave when our bodies abandon us bit by bit?" Bock asks in his introduction to the published script. It's a serious question, but the play, unfortunately, addresses it naively. As John and Emily sit together talking, Bock lowers the boom on his heroine. John smells smoke coming from the kitchen. "I can't smell anything," Emily says. She has forgotten to

turn off a burner, a common enough mistake; the olfactory lapse is the puzzle. "You always do this. It's nothing. It's nothing," John says. "Yeah well it is nothing. Or not much," Emily replies. In fact, Emily's life, and her marriage, is about to change forever.

In a series of spare, well-written scenes, Bock imposes various neurological catastrophes on Emily. Because we have a limited vocabulary for pain, and because we can't often admit the violent and contradictory feelings generated by overwhelming loss, Bock's play, which veers from psychological case study to fairy tale, sets itself an engaging and difficult narrative challenge. At first, Emily meets her illness with stoic composure. "Nothing to be sorry about," she says to her daughter, when she is unable to taste a wedding-cake sample. Jenny explains to her that "even your memory can be affected because memory's connected to smells." "I didn't ask you to find all that out," Emily snaps. "How do you think that makes me feel?" No sooner has Emily lost her sense of taste than she loses her sight as well. She bristles at having to explain to John how to use the BlackBerry that she can no longer read. "I'm not a sack of potatoes," she lashes out at Jenny, humiliated at needing help to get dressed for the wedding. Every

kindness someone shows her is a lacerating reminder of her incapacity. Even John's optimism—"We're going to be O.K."—feels like a refusal to acknowledge her suffering.

At the wedding, while John is fetching drinks, Emily starts to dance—"a St. Vitus's dance," the stage directions read. "Despairing. Ecstatic. Exhausting." The dance seems to mark a seismic internal shift. Afterward, Emily allows herself to be more vulnerable as John describes the wedding to her. "I don't know if I want to be here anymore," she says.

JOHN: Don't say that.

EMILY: This is too hard.

JOHN: You're doing great.

EMILY: I didn't love you. (*John shuts his eyes.*) But I love you now. I'm sorry about everything.

By the end of the scene, Emily has gone deaf. "Johnnie. Johnnie. I can't hear anything," she says. He takes her hand and presses it against his face. The stage directions read, "John can hear everything—a passing car, the flapping of a flag, birds, water." Although anyone who has known real tragedy will not recognize it in Bock's glib depiction of grief, the play paradoxically shows how loss makes us aware of our own smugness. The gift of the dying, Bock is trying to say, is to renew our sense of life. For him, however, it also renews a sense of melodrama. The depredations of collapse and the mutations of self and spirit that attend powerlessness are glossed over by Bock, who suddenly veers off his narrative path like a horse running for the barn. He goes hell for leather for a romantic, unearned, and entirely improbable ending.

At the finale, Emily wakes agitated from a dream of past pleasures, which she describes in voice-over. When John comes out of the bathroom, she turns desperately toward him. "John. John, I, I can't . . ." "No," he says and kisses her. At this point—deaf, blind, almost entirely incapacitated—Emily becomes the object of John's erotic desire. They lock in a torrid embrace and sprawl across the bed. "They make love," the stage direction reads. "It is simple. It is good." It is also sentimental claptrap. John is finally the phallic man, Emily now the compliant woman. To quote Tennessee Williams, a man who genuinely tried to define pain onstage: "Wouldn't it be funny if that was true." ♦