

ANYBODY HOME?

Family dysfunction on parade in three plays.

BY JOHN LAHR

“Relations are simply a tedious pack of people, who haven’t got the remotest knowledge of how to live, nor the smallest instinct about when to die,” Oscar Wilde wrote. Wilde’s mot, in “The Importance of Being Earnest,” was directed at upper-class Victorians, but it proves just as true for the demoralized and demented working-class Connecticut family in Tommy Nohilly’s debut play, “Blood from a Stone” (at the Acorn, under the direction of Scott Elliott). In their dilapidated homestead—cluttered living room, patched walls, leaking roof, temperamental thermostat—the hapless family struggles to survive the bad luck of blood ties. At the center of the sprawling, naturalistic hubbub is Travis (the charming Ethan Hawke), a restless, pill-popping war hero, who has stopped off at his childhood home on his way West to make a new life and put his bewildering clan behind him. Unfortunately, for both Travis and the play, he is still there when the final curtain falls.

Even if it doesn’t have the dramatic traction that it should, Nohilly’s messy world has psychological fascination. “Growing up with you was like having a live grenade in the house,” Travis tells his combustible father, Bill (the outstanding Gordon Clapp). Sensationally vacant, with no access to his feelings or to a vocabulary to describe the world around him, Bill uses force as his idiom. “Prepare to die, motherfucker!” Bill shouts up the stairs to Travis’s feckless younger brother, Matt (Thomas Guiry), who has forged his father’s name on a bank loan. The family narrative is pitched against Bill, and the list of his unappealing qualities is undeniably long. However, one can’t help feeling a certain grudging empathy for the bully, who is also constantly verbally abused. “You got your ass so far up your asshole it makes you stupid, you know that,” his wife, Margaret (Ann Dowd), says. Although Dowd’s snarling delivery is hilarious, Margaret’s rage is toxic, denying Bill any connection. With all the oppressive weight of her mis-

ery projected onto him, it’s no wonder he seems to stagger around the house.

The play subtly demonstrates how Bill’s deadness—his refusal to make sense of things or to properly fix anything—is an unconscious attack on the house, in which he is alternately scapegoat and hostage. Bill has been banished to the attic; even his food—under constant suspicion of being spoiled—is kept separate in the refrigerator. For Margaret, everything related to Bill is somehow tainted: the floor tiles (“He doesn’t even pull up the old, rotten ones. . . . How stupid can you get?”), the kitchen cabinet he buys and installs (“I don’t want that crap in my house!”), the grave he digs for the cat (“Go and dig your grave”). In this brutal and brutalizing atmosphere, Bill short-circuits into a kind of catatonia. Rage stops thought; discombobulation turns to spectacular violence. Once provoked, Bill is a one-man demolition derby. In the course of the evening, he smashes the phone, the windows, the porch, the front door, the thermostat, the wall, and the wife. He also threatens to murder his son, a friend of his mother’s, and the Puerto Rican family next door.

In the play’s best scene, Bill, in an attempt to apologize after one of his wall-punching episodes, wakes up Travis to offer him an ice-cream cone. “You don’t know me, Dad. I thought you’d get to know me by now but you haven’t,” Travis says, extending his hand as they sit eating. “I’m Travis.” For Bill, as Clapp poignantly plays him, the gesture is a semaphore from another planet. “Maybe there’s something in my ice cream. I don’t know,” he says, groping for a response. “I . . . The way your mind works.” But the pain of non-recognition, the frustrated love that can’t bridge the divide between them, is both eloquent and heartbreaking.

If Nohilly’s impoverished crew can’t find words for their experience, the over-privileged Wyeth family, in Jon Robin Baitz’s slick, smart “Other Desert Cities”

(well directed by Joe Mantello, at the Mitzi E. Newhouse), is a household of explainers. In the sunken living room of their plush Palm Springs retreat, the Wyeths—Lyman (Stacy Keach), a movie star turned ambassador, and Polly (Stockard Channing), a Hollywood screenwriter turned G.O.P. grande dame—entertain their high-flying family at Christmas. Their son, Trip (Thomas Sadoski), produces a reality-TV show; their daughter, Brooke (Elizabeth Marvel), a promising novelist rebounding from a crippling six-year depression, has just sold her second book. Polly’s acerbic left-wing sister and former co-writer, Silda (Linda Lavin), who is just out of rehab, also stirs the pot. This is hit commercial entertainment; the character outlines and the aphorisms pop like champagne corks. “Cary was too old,” Polly says of Brooke’s ex-husband. “Too old and too British, which is the same thing, really. They’re all so old, the Brits, even the children.”

Is there any living actress who pisses from a greater height than Stockard Channing? She’s the Sharapova of superiority, strutting hilariously around the stage delivering her zingers like backhand smashes. “I think living on the East Coast has given you the impression that sarcasm is alluring and charming,” she tells Brooke. “It is not. Sarcasm is the purview of teen-agers and homosexuals.” And what about Linda Lavin? Can any actress wield the fish eye to more delicious comic effect? “News flash,” the copper-haired Silda says to her bleached-blond sister, who has wrapped herself in a Texas flag. “You’re not a Texan: You’re a Jew!” Lavin brays the word “Jew” like Jerry Lewis calling for Dean. You want the Channing-Lavin master class in comic timing to go on all night. Unfortunately, Baitz has to get back to the choppy water of his plot.

Brooke’s book—she hands over the manuscript for her parents’ approval on Christmas Eve—turns out to be a family memoir with an emphasis on her dead brother, Henry, a famous victim of sixties radical politics, who rebelled against his Republican parents, joined a cult, found an appetite for drugs and revolution, helped to plant a lethal bomb in a military recruiting center, and ended up apparently throwing himself into the sea, leaving only a note for his mortified parents. His body was never found. Over the de-

acades, the Wyeths have chosen to deep-six his memory as well. The news that Brooke is about to dredge up the scandal and the tragedy for public consumption is as welcome to the Wyeths as a kamikaze pilot. To add to the pressure, serial rights have been sold to *The New Yorker*, whose editors want to send the excerpt to press before the New Year—in other words, in a week. Call me old-fashioned, but this narrative hokum beggars the imagination; no writer would spend years on a controversial nonfiction project that exposes living public figures without undertaking some process of consent, legal or otherwise. Brooke's last-minute maneuver doesn't make her an idiot; it makes her a plot point.

Nonetheless, we go with it, which says something about the confidence of Baitz's writing and the panache of his all-star cast. The Wyeths' eventual revelations don't prevent the publication of the book, but they do change our view of their story. Just what is history, what is fable, and what is the agreement reached, you'll have to pay top dollar to find out. I'd say it's worth it.

Baitz's play shines with the shellac of show biz; by contrast, the New York premiere of Tennessee Williams's 1970 one-act "Green Eyes," a thirty-minute scene about newlyweds in a New Orleans hotel room, is performed for fourteen people at a time, in a suite at the Hudson Hotel (as part of the Coil Festival)—a sort of no-business show business. Sensitive directed by Travis Chamberlain and shrewdly acted by Erin Markey and Adam Couperthwaite, the play is gorgeous: a short, eloquent evening that feels complete, complex, and entirely satisfying. Williams lives so fully, so freely, in the imaginary company of his characters. His dialogue flows with uncanny surprise, catching in its resonance all the psychosexual tension in the alchemy of desire.

When the curtain comes up on Mr. and Mrs. Claude Dunphy—named only "He" and "She" in the script—they are lolling on a double bed with a painted-velvet picture of a pouncing Bengal tiger above them. A bottle of whisky rests in the young man's crotch; the woman is topless. The point at immediate issue is who put the bite marks and scratches on her body. Was it him? Or was it Green Eyes, the man she claims ac-



Hawke and Clapp in "Blood from a Stone." Photograph by Ethan Levitas.

costed her after she left her husband drinking at a bar at 2 A.M.? The power of the play is that we're never sure. The actors perform the roles with a bit of a wink, as if the newlyweds had only just discovered the sadomasochistic thrill of slap and tickle. "Feelin' me like a melon t' see if I'm ripe is not makin' love t' me, Claude," she says, when he rubs up against her as they stand at the window. What arouses Claude, who is on leave from the Vietnam War, his memory haunted by the sounds of violence, is hate. In their dialogue, Williams catches the crackle of aggression. "Hell, you didn't exist in here last night, obliva, obliver, gone," the wife taunts. "Lissen! To be in deeper, he put the flats of his feet on the wall and I swear that I bit the pillow not to scream." Soon afterward, Claude

tackles her onto the bed and, as the tiger's eyes glow green above them, ravishes her in the dark.

In a strategic, well-chosen prologue, added by the director and slyly performed by the sultry Markey, the wife enters in a white dress and teases the audience as she later will her husband. As she undresses, Markey sings Bessie Smith's low-down "Do Your Duty." "If my radiator gets too hot / Cool it off in lots of spots / Give me all the service you got / Do your duty." The song is an impish clue to the actors' interpretation; I'd like to think it also sounds a clarion call for more first-rate productions of Williams's much demeaned later work. Here, for the audience, for the play, for Williams in his centenary year: mission accomplished. ♦