

AT TWO WITH NATURE

Will Eno and Mike Bartlett on lives in limbo.

BY JOHN LAHR

*Conor Lovett as the narrator of "Title and Deed." Photograph by Pari Dukovic.*

The humorous story is strictly a work of art,—high and delicate art,—and only an artist can tell it,” Mark Twain wrote. Will Eno’s “Title and Deed” (elegantly directed by Judy Hegarty Lovett, at the Pershing Square Signature Center) is a masterly case in point. The subtitle of this droll seventy-minute tragicomic jewel is “A Monologue for a Slightly Foreign Man.” Eno may feel slightly foreign, but he’s wholly original. Before you enter the auditorium, a quotation from the playwright on a screen outside tips you off to his rueful, idiosyncratic style. “I try to live every day like it was my third-to-last,” it says. Eno’s game is to kick up his heels even as he collapses before our eyes. “I believe my life happened,” his narrator, who is called Man (played by the subtle, superb Irish actor Conor Lovett), says, adding later, “I once was . . . nah, I probably never was. I probably never was.” Man is an existential sad sack who instinctively sets up a game of hide-and-seek with the audience, a strategy that follows Twain’s dictum about comic

delivery: “The humorous story is told gravely; the teller does his best to conceal the fact that he even dimly suspects that there is anything funny about it.”

The narrator enters through the monumental gray Cubist-angled shards of Christine Jones’s gorgeous set, looking around the stage as if he’d wandered into the wrong room. Bald, jug-eared, thin, wearing a blue jacket, he is a picture of bright-eyed, edgy modesty. He carries a brown canvas satchel—his baggage, so to speak—which he places behind him, at center stage; and he remains there, moving only within a two-foot radius for the rest of the evening. In the trope of the tale, Man is journeying in a foreign land, bringing news of his sense of dislocation. “I’m not from here” are his first words. “I guess I never will be. That’s how being from somewhere works.” From the outset, the *terra* on which he stands is not very *firma*. “I was one of the first people in the wrong line, and then someone helped me out, and I was suddenly the last person in the right one,” he explains,

of his arrival. And so it goes. Although Eno’s writing is commanding, his narrator is not. Man shows himself to be fragile, uncomfortable, full of deft apology for his tentative being. “Don’t hate me, if you wouldn’t mind,” he says gently, adding, “Don’t walk out on me, or, if you do, try to walk out quietly. Keep the screaming to yourself.”

The narrator tries to find points of contact with his unfamiliar audience, which allows Eno obliquely to tease the notions of place and of home (“where the hat’s hanging and the placenta’s buried”). “I’m just very far from the comforting things, as you may be,” Man confides. “All of us marching out of the ocean, breathing and breathing and breathing, and then dropping dead on land, on some land we like to mistakenly think of as ours.” He is between cultures, “trying to draw my blurry homeland into a little more focus”; in other words, he is nowhere, “not homeless, per se, necessarily, but unhomed.” Eno’s play is an exploration of this liminal psychic space; his story is all quandary and no conclusions. Sometimes even trying to end a sentence is impossible for Man; words just disappear on his tongue. “I don’t know how to finish that,” he says, in the middle of an anecdote about earlier high times. He pauses, and then, with a small flourish, adds, “*Ole!*”

This perfectly judged monologue is a demonstration of not knowing, of the slapstick tragedy of uncertainty. By the end of the evening, what have we learned about Man? He has difficulty with his breathing, his swallowing, his jaw. His parents have died (“They brought me into this world, of course, and taught me the difference between right and left”). He wasn’t breast-fed (“So I really didn’t know what to reach for or something”). He lived for a while with Lauren, with whom he was happy until he wasn’t (“I went my separate ways”). And during his travels he briefly hooked up with Lisa (“She would’ve been a good person to tremble with”). Eno is a practitioner of the slow take; he mesmerizes the audience by seemingly not allowing his story to go anywhere. Neither the narrator nor his tale has a dramatic trajectory—a word that implies direction and resolution, notions that the play sends

up. “That’s an odd euphemism for the life span, trajectory, but it has the right connotations, the human-cannonball feel at the beginning, the sickening thump at the end,” Man says. “Good morning, world; maybe I should be a veterinarian or an oceanographer; maybe I’ll marry a princess; thump.”

In the course of the evening, the narrator, in his faux-naïf way, talks a lot about language. “Words are all right,” he says. “You say what you want—at the end of the day, they somehow work their magic.” Then, as if to prove the point, he says to the spellbound audience, “Please be seated.” He stares out into the auditorium. No one moves. “See? Thank you,” he says. It’s good vaudeville stuff. Later, producing a metal lunchbox from his satchel as “a little breather,” he says, “Now, this object tells an interesting story.” For a full fifty seconds, he holds the lunchbox in front of him. “Not in words, I guess,” he says finally. Then he opens the lunchbox to show off its emptiness. “Ah. The universe provides,” he concludes. So does Eno, who can make words sink or curve away like a slider. “I have these things, these words I return to,” the narrator says. “The world, women, animals, men, heart defects, disabilities, trying. My themes. The syllables I return and return to. ‘So, you like repeating yourself,’ you say. ‘I like repeating myself,’ I say. Because, you know, who else is going to do it?”

As channelled through Lovett’s nuanced and canny presence, “Title and

Deed” does the theatrical business: it is daring within its masquerade of the mundane, spectacular within its minimalism, and hilarious within its display of po-faced bewilderment. It is a clown play that capers at the edge of the abyss. “The fucking world. I’m sorry, but the fucking earth. Time, place, happiness. A person should be able to figure it out. It’s only three things,” Man says. Eno’s joking seems to me a great act of courage: a way of facing lostness and learning to live with it. His voice is unique; his play is stage poetry of a high order. You can’t see the ideas coming in “Title and Deed.” When they arrive—tiptoeing in with a quiet yet startling energy—you don’t quite know how they got there. In this tale’s brilliant telling, it is not the narrator who proves unreliable but life itself. The unspoken message of Eno’s smart, bleak musings seems to be: enjoy the nothingness while you can.

Bisexuality, according to Woody Allen, “immediately doubles your chances for a date on Saturday night.” But, as the British playwright Mike Bartlett’s robust and rollicking “Cock” (vivaciously directed by James Macdonald, at the Duke on 42nd Street) demonstrates, it also doubles your trouble. From bleachers looking down on Miriam Buether’s well-designed small green arena, and with a buzzer sounding at the end of each punishing round, we watch a cockfight of sorts, a seesawing of sexual yearning, as the bantam, John (Corry Michael Smith), struggles to de-

cide which team he’s on. A gay man who lives with M (the witty, expert Jason Butler Harner), John is tempted away by W (the spirited Amanda Quaid). Bartlett’s dialogue crackles and pops with the rhetoric of vituperation. “You’re a stream. . . . Do you understand, John? A STREAM. . . . I want a RIVER!” the jilted M says. W is as bold as M is bitter. When she and John come together, they sashay around the arena in ever-tightening circles—a sort of ritualized courting dance. “Look at it there,” she says, of his eponymous member. “Just look at it. I won’t touch it for a moment. I just want to appreciate it.” John promises to leave M for her. But, when he’s alone with M, John promises to stay with him.

As with Og in “Finian’s Rainbow,” John’s “heart’s in a pickle, it’s constantly fickle.” He insists on bringing W to a dinner that M cooks and to which M invites his father (Cotter Smith), as a wild card. There is a battle royal; there is also a winner. However, even as the prize is claimed, Bartlett continues to probe his hero’s chronic fear of the word “commitment.” John is left isolated in the center of the arena, hunkered down with one hand on his head, the other over his ear, in a kind of fetal position. Knowing how to choose and how to lose is a prerequisite of adulthood; John, it seems, is doomed to a perpetual adolescence. With its exhilarating contest, “Cock” elevates John into a totem of today’s sexual merry-go-round. He’s not spoiled *for* choice; he’s spoiled *by* it. ♦

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