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THEATER REVIEW | 'THE PATSY'

A One-Man Act: Mother, Sisters, Father, Lovers (Who Manage to Kiss)



Photographs by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

David Greenspan plays many roles in the Transport Group's production of "The Patsy," at the Duke on 42nd Street, and yet another character in an encore.

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD

Published: July 26, 2011

In "The Patsy," a revival of a forgotten 1925 comedy by Barry Connors presented by the [Transport Group](#), David Greenspan plays the title character, an all-American Cinderella who outwits her scheming sister to land a swell guy.

He also plays the scheming sister. And the squabbling siblings' dithering mother. And their frustrated father, and the boy the girls do battle over, and indeed every other character in the play, right down to the friendly taxi driver with a walk-on.

A protean actor and playwright with an appetite for challenge and an abiding interest in the magic trickery of theater, Mr. Greenspan has retooled an antique Broadway vehicle as a sleek little solo roadster. In hardly more than an hour he dervishes through three acts and three times as many roles, refracting Connors's homespun comedy of young love through his own inimitable stage persona.

For an encore at certain performances, Mr. Greenspan delivers "Jonas," a multilayered meditation on the more deeply imaginative aspects of the actor's art. He wrote this monologue inspired by his experience playing a small role in the recent Broadway revival of "The Royal Family." Both halves of the evening, presented at the Duke on 42nd Street, are directed by Jack Cummings III.

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As theatergoers familiar with his long career as an Off Broadway [original](#) well know, Mr. Greenspan is not a graduate of the Madame Streep School of Thespians, the kind of performer who disappears entirely into the characters he portrays. Much of the fun in “The Patsy” derives from our delight in Mr. Greenspan’s ability to infuse this sweet but creaky play with his own intensely histrionic sensibility. He plays subtle games of distortion with the original material, even as he delights in its sepia-toned sentimentality.

The play takes place in the comfortable living room of the middle-class Harrington family. Mr. Greenspan sets the scene himself, transforming the mundane stage directions (“Left, just below the stairs, is a small stand and a telephone ...”) into an involving little prologue, conjuring an imaginary set in precise detail. (The actual set, by Dane Laffery, corresponds to Mr. Greenspan’s colorful description in only a few details.)

All is not well in the Harrington home. Mrs. Harrington, the kind of scattered, social-climbing housewife you can easily imagine being played by Billie Burke, is exulting in the forthcoming marriage of her daughter Grace to one of the town’s most eligible and well-to-do young men, Billy Caldwell. Her maternal pride is tempered by shame at the family’s current lack of an automobile.

“I’ve got to ride in the streetcar like a common washerwoman,” she moans.

The gruff but jolly Mr. Harrington, who’s in grocery sales, remains unmoved, bluffly telling his wife she’s not going to be tooling around town in a new car anytime soon.

“You’ve got just as much chance of me buying another automobile as you have of seeing a Swiss battleship sinking off the coast of Nebraska,” he cracks in a line that smacks delectably of 1920s stage humor.

The daughters of the house are at simmering loggerheads too. The snobbish Grace lords it over her older sister with an impunity indulged by her mother, while the wholesome, put-upon Patricia is left to pine for Tony Anderson, the psychology-obsessed boy Grace tossed aside when a more enticing prospect came along.

But the plot is not the point. As it scoots along in predictable channels, with a few quirky detours — the self-improving Patricia is obsessed with turning herself into a master of witty repartee through a mail-order catalog — the real show is in Mr. Greenspan’s nimble scrambling among characters. Although he uses no props or costumes, it’s almost always crystal clear who’s talking or fuming or fighting.

It helps, of course, that this comedy is peopled by simply drawn types: the shy hero, the plucky heroine, the doting father. Mr. Greenspan has particular fun with the bad egg Grace and her cool viciousness, which extends to persecuting an impertinent telephone operator in one of the play’s odder byways. Mrs. Harrington’s hyperactive anxiety about the family’s social position occasions feverish bouts of hysteria, as her high-pitched whinnying crescendos into a shrill screech.

The jovially clueless Billy and the sweetly sincere Tony are cleanly contrasted, and Mr. Greenspan’s portrayal of the good-natured Patricia, who tearfully plans to sacrifice the man she loves because she believes he still loves her sister, is infused with a tremulous sincerity that is funny and affectionate. Naturally, the climactic scene in which Tony and Patricia first share a kiss makes for a goofy highlight, as Mr. Greenspan gives and receives the kiss as both the swooning Patricia and the awkward but tender Tony.

If Mr. Greenspan’s performance in “The Patsy” illustrates the actor as dexterous acrobat, “Jonas” reveals the actor as imaginative artist. Mr. Greenspan played the role of a servant



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in the Manhattan Theater Club’s recent revival of George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber’s “Royal Family,” and in this half-hour monologue he explores how even small roles can provide potent inspiration for the inquisitive, inward-looking performer.

Called simply Jo in the text, the character is about 50. Mr. Greenspan, who has invented the fuller name Jonas, imagines his life as a gay man both before and after his service to the acting clan in the play. This fanciful history of a fictional character is intertwined with Mr. Greenspan’s own reflections on playing the role, as well as with the life of yet another fictional character dreamed up by the servant himself.

“There are then the three of us, each inventing what I describe,” Mr. Greenspan says. “There is myself, the character I once played, and the man he invents who invents what I describe.”

Confused? Not for nothing is Mr. Greenspan a Gertrude Stein admirer. He recited a version of Stein’s lecture on theater, “Plays,” before performing another solo play, “[The Myopia](#),” in 2010. Unfortunately, in “Jonas” the swirling, incantatory language often obscures what is already an opaque narrative. Although “Jonas” contains passages that rivet the attention with their lyricism and evocative detail, it tends to float past in a milky swirl without making much of an impression.

While the rusty mechanics of “The Patsy” are pleasingly lubricated by Mr. Greenspan’s freewheeling, nonnaturalistic approach, his own “Jonas” might benefit from a stricter adherence to the logic of linear narrative. We keep losing our place in the story, and with it at least some of our interest too.

THE PATSY

By Barry Connors; directed by Jack Cummings III; performed by David Greenspan; sets and costumes by Dane Laffery; lighting by Mark Barton; sound by Michael Rasbury; dramaturgy by Kristina Corcoran Williams; stage manager, Theresa Flanagan. Appearing as a double bill at certain performances with “Jonas,” a 40-minute monologue written and performed by Mr. Greenspan. Presented by the Transport Group, Mr. Cummings, artistic director; Lori Fineman, executive director. At the Duke on 42nd Street, 229 West 42nd Street, Manhattan; (646) 223-3010, dukeon42.org. Through Aug. 13. Running time: 1 hour 15 minutes.

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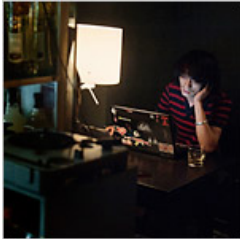
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