

Tongue of a Bird – Review

It's a testament to the success of a production when the audience is literally afraid to applaud. When they forget about characters and see people and even a part of themselves up on stage. And, indeed, it seems very insensitive and rude to clap for people in tremendous pain. This reality of emotion is where *Tongue of a Bird's* strength resides. Painfully real, raw and nuanced, no one is phoning in their performance, and for that alone you should see this play.

It was exhausting (in a good way) for me as an audience member (one who has very little in common with any of the characters I might add) and I can't imagine what it was like for the actors and director to live and relive this every day for two months or more of rehearsals and shows. Having to reach down deep every day is its own special purgatory I wager and qualifies as suffering for your art. The Kleenex budget for this show must have been astronomical. Indeed, the directing and technical elements deserve accolades as well. The set creatively dealt with some very challenging script requirements and the costumes, lighting and sound were all consistent and effective. There's honestly no fault with this production aside from, well...to paraphrase from the movie *Amadeus*... too many notes, or in this case, too many words.

It's easy to see why after reading this play you'd want to produce it. Amazing prose, beautiful, moving monologues, great content, covetous women's roles, it seems like the whole package. But, this play is packed with copious exposition and no matter how good an actor, there's only so much you can do to with pages of thoughts (heavily abstract in places and laden with complex metaphors) the result of which was, that at times this play felt like it was way too much for an audience to take in.

I wrote my college English thesis on Henry James. More specifically I wrote it on why, despite his fantastic writing, Henry James failed at being a playwright (which he desperately wanted to be.) James was a great story-teller, but the way he wrote, the very things that made him a good novelist (his long, detailed descriptions of scenery and internal thoughts of his characters) requires a reader, not a watcher. Dialogue was not Henry's forte which is key for the stage. Yes, his works are brilliant to read, but they do not translate fully to the stage. This is very much how I felt about this play.

I know this is hilarity coming from a girl not known for her brevity or editing skills

and you can be sure this made a special impression on me in that regard. As I sat there finding myself wanting to fast forward over the longer bits and rewind the wow moments, of which there were many, I did think “I know how she feels.” The playwright Ellen McLaughlin, that is. Each word is important, each thought that it completes, each motif it calls back to is personal and seems crucial. No one likes to choose which words stay and which go. You get attached to them all. But, it seemed a very good example of why we must play executioner to the extraneous. What a difference even just a 5 -10 minute reduction would have made.

My thesis on James concluded with the prediction that he was just a bit ahead of his time and that had he lived to see the art of cinema flourish, he would have gone on to be an accomplished screenwriter. Indeed, the year after I completed my thesis, no less than four Henry James films were released. I would make the same prediction about this playwright. So many of the weaker moments could be translated into strengths with cinematography and scoring and so many of the stronger moments could be, Oscar-winning if put on the screen.

That being said, for all *Tongue of a Bird's* “overwriting” it’s easy to move past the less “important” parts and really relish the superior ones of this staged version. It gets a well-deserved 4 out of 5 jewels in the tiara from me. *Tongue of a Bird* plays through June 19th at the intimate [42 seat Dragon Theatre in Palo Alto](#).