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Introduction to Drama 21L.005

Play Review: *The Wild Party* by Andrew Lippa

The stage is awash in a soft red glow, seductive and sinister. The sheer backdrop, haphazardly adorned in empty picture frames, just barely shrouds the silhouettes of the backstage musicians. Picasso-esque paint splatters mark every surface, from the stage floor to the set's monolithic furniture pieces. The lights begin to dim, and then all is silent but the orchestra's quiet shuffling. It's opening weekend for the MIT Music Theatre Guild's production of *The Wild Party*, a provocative musical by Andrew Lippa based on an eponymous 1928 poem by Joseph Moncure March. The Music Theatre Guild (MTG), which formed in 1981, boasts itself as the "oldest and largest theatre organization at MIT," and they certainly did not disappoint. The production was seamless, from the costuming, to the props, to the lighting and the music and beyond. Over the course of two and a half hours, the MTG cast takes the audience on a transformative journey of seduction, suffering, and scandal.

The play's opening number introduces its protagonists—Queenie, a beautiful and feisty young woman seeking a lover to satisfy her lust, and Burrs, a clown by profession but a womanizer by habit. In true musical fashion, the two enter the act separately with their own verses and introductions, and as the song progresses, their voices—and their fictional lives—intertwine in a beautiful harmony. Fast forward three years—as their love grows stale and passion gives way to abuse, Queenie plots to win back her lover and

rekindle her relationship once and for all by throwing the grand party. The entire company is invited, and the audience is introduced to the characters' distinct personas. There's Madeline the aging lesbian, Eddie the pugilist and his petite lover Mae, Jackie the mute ballerina, Kate the life of the party, and more. Conflict ensues when Burrs begins to make advances towards other female party guests and Queenie becomes enraptured with Kate's guest Mr. Black, a mild-mannered and refined man, seemingly a perfect foil for Burrs.

Lippa's choice of names for his characters very aptly contributes to their characterization. For example, "Queenie" is a diminutive form of "queen," a title for royalty, and it is evident that this name directly relates to her initial persona. At the start of the play, Queenie was treated royally, always serviced by her choice of men. However, after meeting her match in Burrs, she is unseated from her throne and is eventually reduced to a victim of domestic violence. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, there is also another alternative definition of "queenie" as "an effeminate male or a homosexual" ("queenie", Def. 1). Though this doesn't seem to be Lippa's target definition, there could be commonalities seen between *The Wild Party's* protagonist—an embodiment of the female desire for sexual freedom—and a homosexual in that both parties seem to be categorically misunderstood by society. Furthermore, it's notable that Lippa names Queenie's troubled lover Burrs, since as a noun, the word "burr" typically refers to a "rough or prickly seed vessel" of a plant, fertile but injurious ("burr" Def. 1). These traits become evident in Burrs as his once fruitful relationship with Queenie devolves into violence. To counter the flamboyant nature of Queenie and Burrs, Lippa then introduces a love rival who stands in stark contrast. Even from his name, "Mr.

Black” appears to be a far more straight-edged character. His highly ordinary name represents the most solemn of colors, one typically reserved for formal occasions and for death. The latter connotation cleverly foreshadows Burr’s eventual demise at the hands of Mr. Black as well.

Beyond names, Lippa’s deliberate and well-executed characterization of Burrs as a clown also serves to add dimension to the story. Clowns are typically associated with exaggerated facial makeup and somewhat grisly, extreme smiles. They’re intended to be humorous figures, yet for the most part, aren’t terribly funny at all. A clown’s humor revolves around self-deprecation and feigned injury. This state of falsified humor envelops Burrs, and the audience can see clearly that behind this flimsy façade—behind the big red nose he puts on for effect—is a troubled soul. Frustrated with the monotony of life, Burrs repeatedly lashes out at Queenie, who happens to be the only person he has to hold on to. When he begins to regret his actions, his apologies are highly insubstantial, just like his clown persona (“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to call you a lazy slut!”).

Holistically, Lippa’s characterization of the protagonists suggests to the audience that perhaps Queenie and Burrs are caricatures of the women and men they collectively represent—the secretly troubled flappers and sheiks of the time period, dissatisfied with life and struggling with issues of self-identity beneath their free-spirited appearances.

Overall, this was a challenging play, both for the actors to perform and for the audience to fully comprehend and appreciate. The MTG, actors and stage crew and all, was definitely well equipped to tackle the challenge. The expert lighting and sound effects of performance aided the creation of not just a story, but an experience. When Queenie first pulls a gun on Burrs, the stage is silent, and there is a single spotlight on her

trembling form. Suspense fills the entire theater as an audience-full of eyes watch for Queenie's next move. When Burrs notices Queenie's infatuation with Mr. Black, his outrage manifests in deep purple spotlights, casting an eerie glow over his features and over the entire set. The play then, both literally and figuratively, ends with a "bang," as the orchestra's well-timed sound effects bring the climactic struggle and the final, fateful gunshot to life.

The play's overall success can be largely attributed the strong performances of the two leads, both vocally and dramatically. Elisa Boles is a captivating Queenie. Her stage presence, tastefully provocative, dominates without overshadowing. And though the play's program asserts that Boles "was definitely not a blonde" before this production, she certainly isn't shy in playing one. Opposite Boles, David Favela as Burrs has his own stake in the spotlight as well. Favela wholeheartedly transforms into and embodies the sadistic clown. Dark and brooding, his portrayal of Burrs leaves the audience members with a slight taste of apprehension in their mouths, as intended. The pair has fantastic onstage chemistry. Throughout the play, the audience can witness their complex character dynamic, as emotions range from heated passion to blinding fury, alternating at the blink of an eye. Boles and Favela do not shy from the play's difficult scenes, including the raw depiction of sexual assault that sets the plot, and the party, in motion. Strong acting is complemented by strong vocals, and in Queenie's solo towards the end of Act 1, "Maybe I Like it This Way," her reverberating voice, high and clear, leaves the audience with no doubt of her conviction and of the magnitude of her internal conflicts.

Beyond the leads, *The Wild Party's* supporting cast proves to be a hidden gem. Their performances, complemented by Talia Weiss's skilled choreography, collectively

come together to add yet another dimension to the play. The flamboyantly gay dynamic duo, Phil and Oscar, injects some lighthearted humor into the otherwise dark tale. Accompanied by just the orchestra, Jackie the mute dancer's onstage solo provides a scintillating visual display that draws the audience further into the play. In just a few minutes, her fluid limbs and interpretive contemporary dance capture all of the protagonists' angst, illustrating how beauty can even be derived from sorrow and tension.

The only portion of the play that seemed to have missed the mark was Kate's character. Actress Amma Okwara delivered her lines, her solos, and her dance numbers well, yet her character decidedly lacks purpose in the play. While Mr. Black is a clear foil for Burrs as the rival love interest of Queenie, Kate's sparse characterization pales in comparison to Queenie's complex personality. Kate pursues Burrs throughout the party, yet he seems grossly disinterested, which renders her not even a worthy challenger for his affection. Perhaps Lippa's original intention was to allow Kate to serve as a contrast to Queenie and provide the play another female protagonist. Yet, from the performance, it seems as though Okwara's talents would have been better invested elsewhere.

Nevertheless, *The Wild Party* was a production worthy of applause. The play brings forth complex issues of love and sexuality and the role of self-identity as a mediating factor. It would be an understatement to say that the MIT Music Theatre Guild's performance was outstanding—the performance was more than outstanding, it was alive. From the vocals to the choreography to chilling portrayals of violence, every aspect of the play drew the audience in closer to the wonderful creature that is theater. After all, who doesn't want to be *the life of the party*?

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