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REVIEW: Williamstown Theatre Festival's 'Many Happy Returns' is a moving meditation on womanhood and connection

By Jennifer Huberdeau



NORTH ADAMS — “Summer is a time to cut loose,” the narrator says, as a sinewy woman, hair pulled back in a practical bun, dressed in black pants, white crocheted top and sneakers stands in front of the audience.

The stage of The Annex, Williamstown Theatre Festival's new black box theater, is filled with vases of flowers, and a table to the right of the stage is filled with party hats and other festive items. The woman is Monica Bill Barnes and the narrator, sitting at the front of the stage at a laptop, is longtime collaborator Robbie Saenz de Viteri.

“There's going to be some talking, some dancing ... like a party where you just realized you're the oldest person in the room,” Saenz de Viteri says. “We like to look everyone in the eye to start our day together.”

In an essay shared on Williamstown's website, Saenz de Viteri writes, “In the opening lines of ‘The Glass Menagerie,’ Tom Wingfield explains something about the play to the audience: ‘The play is memory. Being a memory play, it is dimly lighted, it is sentimental, it is not realistic. In memory, everything seems to happen to music. That explains the fiddle in the wings. I am the narrator of the play, and also a character in it.’”

This is “Many Happy Returns,” their version of a memory play, although Saenz de Viteri questions if Tennessee Williams would recognize it as such. Together, Barnes and Saenz de Viteri are sharing a character — Barnes is the body, moving through memories, and he's the voice.

“Monica is a woman who believes in applying a subtle coat of lipstick before an important moment,” he says as they both apply lipstick.

And so we begin, with a short introduction to the space, to the history of Many Happy Returns as a saying ... its earliest usage dates back to Sir Roger Newdigate in 1789, Saenz de Viteri borrows a set of bangles from an audience member, a prop that will let him play another character later on.

There's a joke, an ice breaker of sorts, involving a beach ball that's tossed into the audience and later deflated dramatically, Barnes eventually stabbing it with scissors to end the bit. She floats across the stage, twirling and moving, cracks a can of soda, as Saenz de Viteri shares memories of going to a TGI Friday's, first with her parents, then with a group of friends — Tricia, Aggie and Annie. The memory is happy, then sadder as we learn her friend group has drifted apart. Barnes' movements are joyful, then somber.

We learn of how her adult friendships with these women have changed, from a group of jovial, laughing girls to a more complicated camaraderie of individual relationships. Tricia is one who she has a good time with when they are doing the same thing. Barnes and Chelsea Hecht are synchronized as they move together, balancing yoga mats on their heads, the movement is fluid, but emotes a kind of staleness and stiffness at the same time.

The friend, Aggie (Christina Robson), has vanished without a trace, so the memory is from an earlier time, of a young woman who was the life of the party, the kind of friend who decides one night, “we're smokers,” and suddenly is. The music, is upbeat and joyous, as the Barnes and Robson swing, sway and jump.

Anne (Flannery Gregg) is and always has been the competitive friend, who, when occasionally seen, is there to check in and check boxes. The women dance, side by side, legs lifting up and down, faster and faster, as if one is waiting for the other to give up.

Interspersed with these interactions are solo dances, dances of admission:

"I am best by myself."

"I have made a dance called my permanent moves."

"Are these my permanent moves?"

"These are not my permanent moves."

"There was a time I made lists of things I was never going to do."

The one time that Barnes speaks, it is not to speak, but to sing Billy Joel's "The Piano Man," playing the harmonica and cajoling the audience into singing the chorus.

Saenz de Viteri is narrating, writing, rewriting, moving us back and forth in time, in memory. Are these real memories? Or a story that is becoming a shared memory?

The bangles are part of a story that is now a shared memory, of bracelets bought some 40 years ago in Maine, that transform into Wonder Woman's Bracelets of Submission.

"Sometimes I feel like I am watching a movie of myself," he says, the bangles eventually being returned to their owner in the audience.

It all culminates in another memory, of a youthful dance party, the four women reunited and dancing. In this memory, "It will be as it was," youthful and joyful. This is not the present where they are "hard, concentrated versions" of themselves.

Whether or not this is a memory play that Williams would recognize, it doesn't matter, although I believe he would recognize the women who dance through it with every emotion available to them.

This is a play, a dance, a shared experience of what it is like to be a woman, how our friendships evolve, fizzle and rekindle; how we can prefer to be alone and yet crave companionship simultaneously. Women are complicated, and as we enter middle age, we come into our power — and yet, it is a time when we can feel the most alone. Barnes and Saenz de Viteri are not just sharing memories or stories; they're sharing a collective experience that is touching audience members, even bringing some of us to tears.

THEATER REVIEW

What: "Many Happy Returns" co-created by Monica Bill Barnes and Robbie Saenz de Viteri; choreographed by Barnes and written by Saenz de Viteri.

Who: Williamstown Theatre Festival

With: Flannery Gregg, Chelsea Hecht, Indah Mariana, Mykel Marai Nairne and Christina Robson.

Where: The Annex, 245 State Road, North Adams

Performances:

11 a.m. July 25 and 27; Aug. 3

10 a.m. July 26 and Aug. 2

Noon, Aug. 2

Tickets: \$50, general; included in weekend pass

Reservations and information: 413-458-3253, wtfestival.org

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