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CRITIC'S PICK

‘Liberation’ Review: A Tony-Worthy Ensemble Plotting Revolution

Bess Wohl’s play, about a consciousness-raising group in 1970s Ohio, transfers to Broadway where it remains powerfully moving — and funny.



Susannah Flood, left, and Betsy Aidem in “Liberation” at the James Earl Jones Theater in Manhattan. Credit...Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

By Elisabeth Vincentelli

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For the past 45 years, Margie has had the same full-time job: looking after her family. She’s compiled a three-page list of all the tasks she does around the house and around the clock, while her husband doesn’t lift a finger. Divorce is not an option, though. “I’ve never paid a bill,” Margie says with dry despair. “I don’t have a bank account. I can’t drive.” So she daydreams about stabbing him.

We are in 1970, when such indentured labor was common. Yet the women listening to Margie (Betsy Aidem) in an Ohio feminist consciousness-raising circle are still shocked. So is the audience watching Bess Wohl’s “Liberation,” which opened Tuesday night at the James Earl Jones Theater on Broadway after an Off Broadway run last winter. The miracle of this play is that the circle feels as if it is extending to embrace us all.

By no means do I want to give the impression that “Liberation” is the kind of good-for-you didactic show that feels like an assignment. Not only does its sustained pace make the story downright suspenseful — we quickly become invested in these women and wonder what will become of them — but spending time in their company is also an unadulterated pleasure. Directed with sensitivity by Whitney White and performed by a cast preternaturally in sync, the production looks at community and individuality, determination and self-determination, in an elegiac and impassioned manner.

And it’s consistently funny, too. Wohl (“Small Mouth Sounds,” “Camp Siegfried”) blesses her characters with a humor that blends precisely calibrated degrees of weary sarcasm, biting wit and droll resignation, along with the kind of pent-up fury that comes from being told repeatedly to suck it up and stay in your lane. Take, for example, the irrepressible Isidora (Irene Sofia Lucio): Reminiscing about a rough childhood in which she was pretty much raised by nuns, she calls them “monsters” and then quickly adds, “but at least they were women in leadership positions.”

The action mostly takes place in 1970 and 1973, with the dates unobtrusively appearing on the clock of the rec-center basketball court (lovingly recreated by the scenic designer David Zinn) where the meetings are held, and some of it is set decades later. Connecting it all is a narrator, the daughter of the group’s initiator, Lizzie (the superb Susannah Flood in both parts).



Susannah Flood plays Lizzie, whose objective for the meetings is to “raise our consciousness” and “change the world.”Credit...Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

In 1970, Lizzie is a journalist stuck covering weddings and obituaries at the local paper, despite having a degree in international relations. Her objective for the meetings: “We raise our consciousness, we change the world,” she says. Simple to state, not so simple to achieve.

Consciousness-raising groups, a staple of second-wave feminism, were talkin’ bout a revolution. But in many ways, talking *was* the revolution.

Aidem (a Tony Award nominee for “Prayer for the French Republic”) lends a subtle mix of steeliness and vulnerability to Margie, the oldest of those who saw Lizzie’s fliers and turned up. (Aspiring tradwives might want to pay attention to what she has to say.)

The shy Dora (Audrey Corsa) is stuck in her entry-level job, passed over for promotions in favor of her incompetent male colleagues; the similarly underemployed Isidora is stuck in a green-card marriage — Ohio didn’t have no-fault divorce then; and the reserved Celeste (Kristolyn Lloyd) is stuck taking care of her elderly mother. Then there is the deliciously blunt Susan (Adina Verson), who faces hardships but may be the freest of the group, a visionary who dreamed up a “womanifesto” and has the brass to wear a “Lavender Menace” T-shirt, reclaiming a term used by Betty Friedan to deride lesbians.

Despite their differences, the women share many similarities and the ensemble comes across as organic rather than engineered to neatly fill demographic and interest boxes. (This was also the case in Lucy Kirkwood’s “The Welkin,” set among impaneled women in 18th-century England, and Kimberly Belflower’s high school-set “John Proctor Is the Villain.”)



The show’s strong cast includes, from left: Flood, Adina Verson, Kristolyn Lloyd, Irene Sofia Lucio, Aidem and Audrey Corsa. Credit...Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

In the process of getting to know one another, the members must question their biases. As the only African-American woman in the discussion group, Celeste obviously has a different perspective on what liberation means. So does Joanne (Kayla Davion), a Black woman who wanders into the gym during a meeting to retrieve a backpack and returns later, pointedly telling Lizzie's adult daughter — but really, the playwright herself — “I'm not even sure why I was there. I'm being underutilized. Not the first time.” (The show's hall-of-mirrors structure incorporates occasional fourth-wall breaking interventions.)

While “Liberation” (subtitled “A Memory Play About Things I Don't Remember”) is not autobiographical, it is rooted in real life, with the characters inspired by interviews Wohl conducted with second wave feminists. The playwright's mother worked at Ms. magazine, as Lizzie herself eventually does.

How Lizzie ends up leaving Ohio makes up one of the show's thorny story lines: She is almost discomfited to have fallen in love with Bill (Charlie Thurston), and resists following him to New York. Marriage is equally complicated. “Liberation” is cleareyed about blind spots and compromises: Can you still fight a system if you reap its benefits, especially via a husband?

In looking back at an earlier generation's struggles, achievements and failings, the play aims to examine varying definitions of equity and agency, and whether progressivism is enough when radical activism might be needed. Tellingly, Lizzie always puts on the brakes any time someone comes up with an idea she thinks is too extreme. Yet unorthodox approaches can be the mind-scrambler needed to help people reconsider assumptions and hangups, as illustrated by an audacious Act II scene in which a meeting is held in the nude.

Wohl proceeds with such fluid confidence that slight missteps jump out. At one point, a character admits to voting for Nixon over McGovern in the 1972 presidential election. The line got a raucous laugh the night I attended the play, but then Wohl runs it into the ground by expanding on the nihilistic rationale for that particular decision, which will ring all-too familiar on the heels of recent U.S. elections and breaks the period spell. (Luckily, the characters don't have a crystal ball that would let them peek at the current rollback of women's rights.)

But this is a rare dissonance in a production that just percolates, from Queen Jean's costumes (including an especially inspired use of denim) to a cast in a state of grace. If there is a show that can make the case for a Tony Award for best ensemble, it's this one. White directs the actors like a conductor leading an orchestra: Each one gets to shine in at least one aria (or speech, in this case), but they also function as a multifaceted single organism onstage. When these women talk, we want to hear every word.

Liberation

Through Jan. 11 at James Earl Jones Theater, Manhattan; liberationbway.com; Running time: 2 hours 30 minutes.