

## The Ritalin Century

Review of “Distracted” by Lisa Loomer. This Roundabout Theater production, currently in previews at the Laura Pels Theater, stars Cynthia Nixon and is directed by Mark Brokaw. The play opens March 3<sup>rd</sup>.

In writing this review I am turning off the distractions of internet emails and my cell phone. Such distractions would make it harder to focus and would invade the scant quiet time for contemplation left to most of us. Before the start of Lisa Loomer’s timely play about a family dealing with the many confusing treatments of ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder; code 314.01 in DSM IV) we are not only asked to turn off our cell phones but warned by an off-stage voice that we may be addicted to them. This prepares us for a play that actually diagnoses our, previously undiagnosed, communal ADHD. Television monitors, up-to-the minute news, such as the recent peanut scares and the latest slide of the stock market, stream across a curtain scrim as the play opens with Mama (Cynthia Nixon) sitting in a lotus position attempting to meditate before getting her cursing nine-year-old Jesse off to school. Her mobile phone rings numerous times before she answers an automated request for money. Dad is rushing off to work, his breakfast switched by Mama to more nutritional, but to him, inedible fare. We, the audience, are transported into our 21<sup>st</sup> century -- as if we are not already (t)here.

Following her phone-interrupted meditation we don’t actually see rambunctious Jesse until the final scene, two hours later. We do hear him, however, making life for his parents a nightmare with “f...this and f....that.” Mama is on stage for the entire length of the play. In many fast-changing scenes, directed with aplomb and impeccable timing by Mark Brokaw, Mama tries to find the right diagnosis and treatment for their son. As we read in the daily papers, it is the common plight of innumerable American families. Made comic through exaggerated stereotypes of the many characters, like the robotic Dr. Broder writing prescriptions on the run, the painful realities are buffered. A few actors play the various neighbors and caretakers who themselves occasionally step out of role to add to the topsy-turvy world on stage. Nearly everyone, including the care-givers, is stressed, vulnerable, and a candidate for some modern day, drug or in-patient treatment..

Nutrition, allergies, environmental toxins, genetics, lack of parental attention are all implicated as possible causes. Besides the varied conflicting findings, pharmaceutical cocktails are supplemented by behavioral treatment, and alternate holistic medical treatments as well as some yet-to-be-invented treatments imagined by the playwright add to our dizziness..

A gossipy woman with obsessive-compulsive personality traits disturbs her neighbors. Jesse's baby sitter Natalie, another neighbor's daughter, is a self mutilator. This behavior, she says, makes her real pain bearable. Prozac, Zoloft, Ritalin are dispensed like candy. Side-effects - from weight gain to insomnia to psychosis - abound in this suburban asylum. The strain on the marriage of Mama and Dad (nameless they are like generic parents) becomes manifest. Their weekly night-out, with its scheduled sex is, naturally, interrupted by Jesse. This is the psychopathology of modern everyday life."

As already mentioned, we are all, to varying degrees, a part of this world, and in a number of scenes the fourth wall of the stage is absent, as we are even more confronted by a curved carnival "mirror held up to nature" and to ourselves. Needless to say, neither talk therapy nor family therapy reaches the radar screen. I shall not reveal the unexpected mental state of Jesse as he enters the closing scene. Welcome to the 21<sup>st</sup> century!

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