



Watching the Descent: “Falls for Jodie” Traces an Imagined Path Walked by Two

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by Pat Rogers

It's an intense journey. The audience, provided with front row seats, can't help but catch the fear as a pair of newly acquainted men parlay words and wants in a seedy hotel set near the Yale campus. One wants nothing more—initially—but to meet and captivate the illusive object of his romantic obsession. One sees an opportunity to crawl out of poverty and will stop at nothing to leave the pit he inhabits.

With both young men living on the edge, one is already slipping into the yawn of what will become full-blown madness. But that day isn't today. Today is the day the two men meet and set something in motion that warrants sitting on the edge of your seat as it unfolds before your eyes. At the end, the question of “What if?” begs to be asked.

Welcome to “Falls for Jodie” which is currently in its second (and final) week of performances at Guild Hall's John Drew Theater. The drama tells the imagined tale of what happens when Robert Hinkley, Jr., who famously stalked Jodi Foster and tried to assassinate then-US President Ronald Regan, is befriended by a hotel clerk with dubious intentions. As their encounters pass from loaded conversations with dangled promises into an unlikely business partnership, Hinkley, Jr. begins to unravel just as his new associate begins to gain a stability of his own.



Performance of “Falls for Jodie” at John Drew Theater at Guild Hall
featuring Trevor Vaughn and Michael Paul. Photo by Joe Brondo.
Courtesy Guild Hall.

The intensity level of the play is intended by the playwright, who said he crafted each scene to capture linchpin moments in the young men's interactions. The outcome of each interaction is never assured and the audience must wait for each resolution as the tension continues to build. The two actors—Trevor Vaughn and Michael Paul—are up to the task. The pair expertly execute their roles and create a taunt connecting tightrope between themselves, the unfolding situation and for the audience to dangle from in suspense.

The emotional charged situation may be felt more keenly by viewers as the entire audience sits on stage—surrounding the actors and action—and bear an intimate witness to one young man's very

real descent. The proximity to the actors allows the audience to easily notice fleeting facial expressions and minute gestures that reveal the changing mindsets of both characters, contributing to an intimate evening of theater. The talk back that follows each performance enhances this experience with sharing by the actors, the director, the audience and sometimes even the playwright himself.

Written by Eric Micha Holmes, “Falls for Jodie” feels like a polished play even though it is still in the development phase. The play was written by Holmes as part of his MFA at the University of Iowa in 2014 with workshop performances held in New York City on two separate occasions. More recently, “Falls for Jodie” was performed at two brief runs in Texas as interest was rekindled in the play.

Bringing the play to Guild Hall’s John Drew Theater was a team effort by actor Trevor Vaughn and director Bill Burford, who stepped in for the Hamptons production, as well as fellow castmate Michael Paul, all who share a Texas upbringing (as did Hinkley, Jr.).

The trio have worked together previously on various theatrical enterprises and projects so jumping in mid-stream to present the drama to East End audiences has been a seamless one. Burford and Vaughn have both contributed to Guild Hall theater and performance with Paul and Holmes first time creatives to the East End.

The actors are also childhood friends and the connection between them is a quality integrated into their performances in “Falls for Jodie.” So does the fact Vaughn’s part as the hotel clerk was written with him in mind, Holmes explained in an interview.

“I knew his range as an actor and wanted to take advantage of the range of talents he brings to the stage,” Holmes said. “I wrote the part of Eddie for Trevor.”



Performance of “Falls for Jodie” at John Drew Theater at Guild Hall featuring Trevor Vaughn and Michael Paul. Photo by Joe Brondo. Courtesy Guild Hall.

Both playwright and director also mentioned the acting talents of Paul, who is returning to the stage after a hiatus. Trained at Julliard, his nuanced performance realizes the playwright and director’s intention of portraying Hinkley, Jr. as a person who is someone’s child, brother and friend versus the iconic he later becomes. In this way, the play contains more power and is relatable by the audience from a variety of access points.

This relatability—whether from the viewpoint of watching a loved one struggle with mental illness or from the close friend who wishes to help and keep the person from harming themselves or others—are topics that are frequently popping up in the talkbacks held at Guild Hall, Burford said. Experiences are also being shared by audience members who have memories from the late seventies and eighties, he said.

“The play captures a hinge point in American policy and politics,” Burford said. “Some of the most interesting comments have been by people whose lives connected with some parts of the play.” Some people shared their experiences of being in New Haven, CT at the time of Hinkley’s frequent visitors or their memories of hearing about John Lennon’s shooting or other specifics from the play.

The talkback is an important aspect of the Guild Hall production, both men said in separate interviews. Audience feedback can help with the play’s future development as it receives a fine tuning for future productions or workshop productions. In addition to personal experiences, audience members are sharing their reactions to the play, asking questions of the actors and director, and hearing their responses to being involved in the production of “Falls for Jodie.”

Burford hopes the play can start dialogues on the issues of gun violence, young men who turn to his as a vehicle and how to assist those with mental illness.

Beyond the hope for the play’s future, “Falls for Jodie” is already a tour de force.

“I’d like people to come see the play,” Burford said. “It’s an enjoyable experience despite the play’s topic.”

BASIC FACTS: “Falls for Jodie” is performed at Guild Hall’s John Drew Theater through Sunday, March 17, 2019.

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