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Off-Broadway Review: 'Life According to Saki' at 4th Street Theatre

Posted By: Jacquelyn Claire on: February 16, 2017

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Caitlin Thorburn and Tom Machell in "Life According to Saki." Photo credit: Monica Simoes

"Life According to Saki," winner of the 2016 Best of Edinburgh Award, is a breath of fresh British air that has infiltrated the East Village and charmed the pants off us all. Every year, the Carol Tambor Foundation gives this award, which affords a theatre company that have excelled at the Edinburgh Festival a fully-paid run in a NYC venue. They have chosen really well! It's a pop-up story book for adults come to life - making you marvel at the wonder and surprise of a good story told magically. It's a lush oasis that shimmers on the horizon, refueling our thirsty psyches. It's unique and elevating and dark and dangerous and delicious.

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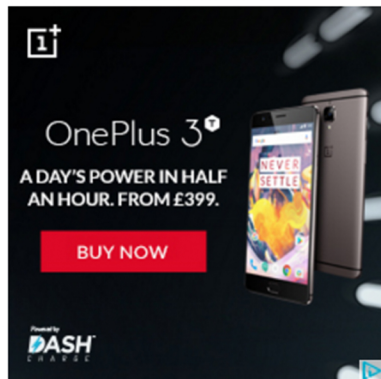
“ . . .gem, gold nugget, lucky penny in the fruitcake experience. . .

We are in the trenches of the First World War. A group of young “men” huddle in the alleyways of these war labyrinths, wishing for a way out, through, or across the maze. Out of the mud will come the aloe in the form of Hector Hugh Munro, whose non de plume at the time was “Saki.” He was an established, highly successful writer before joining the war effort. He was much older than the adolescents sent to do battle and his effervescent presence lifts morale and strengthens the group. His ultimate weapon against the enemy is...story.

His Wilde and Wodehouse-styled stories bloom out of the despair of the bloodied earth to poke a sabre into narcissistic politics and shallow society. As Saki narrates, our “soldiers” transform into the various characters using their trench belongings to create the desired environments. An army blanket might become the flapping ears of an elephant, and lanterns become car headlamps. They also bring in a plethora of gorgeous puppets and other poignant props while the action plays out in front of a shadow puppetry-style screen. It’s visually sumptuous and an unstoppable, airborne, enthusiasm contagion.

Katherine Rundell has written a play that operates on many intriguing levels. There is the bedrock of the horror of war and the death that awaits some of the soldiers who will cross no man’s land at the end. There is the beauty of Saki’s stories woven into a new tale by this skilled playwright. There is the satirical political metaphor that knocks at your hypothalamus, making you feel unstable in our current reality. There is also the idea of play, playmaking, and war “games” that infect the audience’s balance. It’s an intelligent, witty warning.

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Director Jessica Lazar has created a physical language for the piece to match the layered text. The six cast members play a multitude of hilarious roles, using accents, exceptional characteristics, and sheer youthful passion. Lazar has crafted a series of stories, each with its very unique flavor and form. Every scene sees the cast create complex worlds with minimal props, like a box, a hat, and an umbrella – and we see the picture of the place with alarming clarity. We feel the edges of the space, its particular rhythm, size, and sentiment.

We peep in through the windows and marvel, and as soon as the climax is reached, the room dissolves as if into fog, as if it never existed, and we find ourselves in an entirely new space. The pace is fast and dynamic. She has created an exhilarating ensemble who move together like a school of fish in moonlight and constant movement. It’s a monumental feat of agility and ridiculous amounts of talent.

It is almost impossible to single out any one person from the cast – they are spectacular team players, giving the perfect amount of focus to the one carrying the story in that moment. They pass the ball to each other seamlessly and generously.

David Paisley as Saki was intoxicating as the gentle, open, joyful storyteller, plying his craft in



spite of the snipers and shells bombarding their theatrical side show. He has an engaging, powerful presence and took us on the journey with honesty, playfulness, and deep sorrow. We see the “show” through his eyes, and it’s a riveting sight.

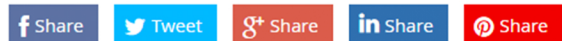
The other five cast members played an extraordinary amount of people, puppets, and inanimate objects with brilliant skill and superb comic timing. Caitlin Thorburn, Ellen Francis, Phoebe Frances Brown, Tom Machell, and Tom Lambert deserve a separate rave review for every cameo they masterly crafted. They were all extraordinary.

“Life According to Saki” is a must-have, shaker baby, snow globe that you just want to climb inside. It holds a moment of camaraderie in WWI frozen in time, and when shaken, it heartwarmingly reveals the gold dust of our inner humanity.

This gem, gold nugget, lucky penny in the fruitcake experience is produced by Bridie Bischoff and Tom Grayson for Atticist Productions, and we applaud their vision.

Running Time: 70 minutes, with no intermission.

“Life According to Saki” is currently running through March 5, 2017 at 4th Street Theatre in New York, NY. For more information and tickets, click [here](#).



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jacquelyn Claire

I am an award winning playwright, director and actor. I am a Jack of all trades with a deep passion for innovative theater, well crafted performances and heart stopping scripts. I spent the last 20 years writing, directing and producing for television, theatre, film and events in South Africa. I moved to New York City in 2015 where I spend my days bewitched by the arts.

