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THEATER



Colin Woodell & Mary Elizabeth Winstead, Photo by Joan Marcus

## ‘Dying City’ Review: A Hurt-Filled Masterpiece

*Christopher Shinn directs his own play about a grieving widow and a troubled movie star coming to terms with suffering.*

BY TERRY TEACHOUT

Christopher Shinn is one of America’s best-known playwrights—but only in England, where his plays are seen regularly. They get done over here with passable frequency, but not nearly as often as they deserve, and it’s been more than a decade since Mr. Shinn last had a high-profile New York production. That was Lincoln Center Theater’s 2007 off-Broadway staging of “Dying City,” which had received its premiere the previous year at London’s Royal Court Theatre and went on to be a finalist for the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for drama. Alas, Mr. Shinn’s timing was bad: “Dying City,” which is a bit knotty but nonetheless gripping, lost to Tracy Letts’s “August: Osage County,” a more obviously straightforward piece of theatrical storytelling, which opened on Broadway three weeks after winning the Pulitzer and promptly became the new play everyone was talking about.

For all these reasons, it is extraordinarily good news that Second Stage Theater is giving “Dying City” its first New York revival, in a production of high merit that has been directed by Mr. Shinn himself. I regret to say that I missed “Dying City” the first time around, but now that I’ve finally seen it, I’m stunned: It’s one of the finest new American plays to open in this century, a deeply serious drama of overwhelming emotional impact.

In truth, “Dying City” isn’t really all that “difficult,” at least not in the way that the plays of a writer like Harold Pinter continue to present real problems of understanding, but it can be hard to follow unless you pay close attention. This is because it’s a two-actor, three-character show in which the male actor (Colin Woodell) plays identical twins. If that sounds like a gimmick, rest assured that it’s not. The device is central to the underlying meaning of the play, for the two brothers, though they look alike, are as different as it’s possible to be. Peter, whom we meet first, is a glib, self-obsessed movie star who is taking time off from Hollywood to appear in a Broadway revival of “Long Day’s Journey Into Night.” Craig is—or, rather, was—a soldier who is sent to Iraq and dies there under mysterious circumstances. As for Kelly (Mary Elizabeth Winstead), his grieving widow, she’s a therapist who cannot accept Craig’s death, in part because their marriage was already on the rocks when he shipped out to Baghdad.

Peter’s got problems of his own. He’s a gay man who’s having trouble dealing with his sexuality, enough so that it’s started to put his career at risk. So when he knocks on the door of Kelly’s apartment late one night, not having seen or spoken to her since Craig’s funeral, it’s a safe bet that hell is in the offing. “Peter, you’ve invaded my home,” she tells him angrily at play’s end. The phrase she uses to describe his unwanted visit is weighted with dark meaning: He comes as a thief in the night to lure her back into a painful past that she longs to put behind her.

“Dying City” is set in January 2004 and July 2005, in the midst of Gulf War II. Yet it’s neither about the war nor about Peter’s homosexuality, or anything else remotely so reductive. Unlike the issue-driven message plays that have come to dominate

contemporary American theater and whose meaning can be “solved” as neatly and uninterestingly as a mathematical equation, Mr. Shinn has instead told us a stark tale of how the world invades the private lives of ordinary people and makes them suffer, and how they come to terms—or don’t—with that suffering.

Mr. Woodell, who is best known for his work in TV but has done a fair amount of stage acting, brings off his double role with exceptional skill. It’s Ms. Winstead who will surprise you, though: Lately of FX’s “ Fargo,” she is making her stage debut in “Dying City,” but there is nothing at all unsure or unformed about her acting, and she clearly belongs on Broadway. Mr. Shinn is also making a debut of sorts, for he was called in at the next-to-last minute to stage this production when Lila Neugebauer withdrew to direct a movie. While he’s done next to no directing until now, you’d never guess it: His staging is simple, transparent and utterly true to life. So, up to a point, is Dane Laffrey’s set, most of which looks just like a shabby, all-but-empty New York apartment. The left side of the upstage wall, however, is ominously and impenetrably black, an unsettling visual counterpart to the lives of the three characters.

It goes without saying that “Dying City” won’t send you home smiling. Instead, you’ll be living in the hurt-filled world of Mr. Shinn’s three characters long after you leave the theater, and you won’t soon forget their shared plight. Even on a first viewing, it already looks to me very much like a masterpiece.