

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

‘Take Me Out’ Review: Jesse Tyler Ferguson in a Major League Hit

A superb revival of Richard Greenberg’s 2003 Tony Award-winning play

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April 8, 2022



Jesse Williams and Ken Marks

Photo by Joan Marcus

“Am I talking too much?” asks the baseball-besotted business manager Mason Marzac, played by Jesse Tyler Ferguson, in the thoroughly winning Broadway revival of Richard Greenberg’s “Take Me Out.”

Frankly, yes, Mason, you are—but please don’t stop. Certainly Mason has been gifted with an ample vocabulary, an agile mind and a tendency to overshare. Nor is he the only character in the play whose speeches go into extra innings. But Mr. Greenberg is a writer of such fierce intelligence and fluid eloquence that it would be churlish to complain, and the new Second Stage production, directed by Scott Ellis and featuring a sterling cast, buffs Mr. Greenberg’s often lyrical language to a fine polish.

“Take Me Out,” which won the Tony for best play in 2003, depicts the fallout from a celebrated baseball player’s casual public announcement that he’s gay. The conceit was novel and intriguing at the time, although there was almost as much chatter about the play’s shower and locker-room scenes—featuring ample displays of full-frontal nudity—as there was about the play’s merits.

The news both good (for the play) and bad (for the culture of sports): “Take Me Out” remains just as funny, sharp-witted and insightful some two decades later, in part because the number of openly

gay baseball luminaries to this day can be counted on—well, never mind, they can’t be counted at all. The player who causes a ruckus for his team, center fielder Darren Lemming, is portrayed by Jesse Williams with an expertly judged mixture of smooth charisma and confidence bordering on arrogance. Darren’s strutting assurance of his own abilities and value to his team, the Empires (read: Yankees, replete with pinstripes, and underscored by Mr. Williams’s slight resemblance to Derek Jeter), gives him the conviction that his revelation will not cause any serious damage to his career.

He is proved both right and wrong. He remains a star player, his skills at their peak, but his sexuality unsurprisingly causes anxious murmurings and contemptuous looks from his teammates, with the exception of the amusingly almost over-understanding Kippy Sunderstrom (Patrick J. Adams). In a locker-room exchange that Darren handles with the smoothness with which he’d catch an easy pop fly, he deflects the outraged whining of his teammate Toddy (a hilarious Carl Lundstedt), who complains, “Why do I have to go around this room, which is, has been, which is this sancchewy, rackled with self-consciousness about my body?” Darren keeps the temperature low, even when Toddy all but shrieks when Darren strips down: “Why did you do that?” Answer: “I’m takin’ a shower, Toddy.” (Mr. Greenberg has a little too much fun at the expense of the players whose ignorance is sometimes cartoonishly lampooned.)

As the ripples from his revelation move outward, and inward, with Darren pondering his own commitment to the game, Darren taps Mason to explore his financial options, with the recognition that things might become too uncomfortable for him. And when the team calls up a gifted pitcher, Shane Mungitt (Michael Oberholtzer), from the minor leagues, Shane’s gallingly blunt racism and homophobia set him on a collision course with Darren, who is ultimately provoked beyond endurance, resulting in tragedy.

Mr. Williams is superb at subtly delineating the internal changes that Darren undergoes—no easy task when the character remains stoic, unsentimental and fiercely private. But while Darren’s evolutions drive the plot, Mr. Greenberg gives ample time to the other major characters, chief among them the loquacious and deliciously neurotic Mason.

Mr. Ferguson, the “Modern Family” star who has remained a staple of the New York stage, has a field day—as expansive as a baseball green—in this rich role, handily the play’s funniest. Mason’s conversion from baseball ignoramus to statistic-spewing superfan seems to render him more giddy by the minute. Mason’s swooning paean to the meanings and the beauties of the national pastime, which he calls “a perfect metaphor for hope in a Democratic society,” is rendered with intoxicating delight and affecting earnestness. He argues that “baseball is better than Democracy—or at least than Democracy as it’s practiced in this country—because unlike Democracy, baseball acknowledges loss.” Language new to the revival? No, Mr. Greenberg was just eerily prescient.

Among the other standout performances are those of Mr. Oberholtzer, infusing his character with an obtuseness and racism that nevertheless do not totally preclude our sympathy for him, and Mr. Adams as Kippy, who provides the narration and tries with increasing desperation to play unofficial umpire, navigating the tensions rising like a blistering head of steam in the locker room. Also superb is Brandon J. Dirden as Darren’s closest friend in the sport, Davey Battle. Mr. Dirden studiously avoids overplaying the character’s pious righteousness, even when the deeply religious Davey turns against Darren.

But Mr. Ellis, a veteran Broadway director here at the top of his form, has in fact fielded an entirely terrific all-male cast, almost a dozen actors who, as with the best pro sports teams, work smoothly together even as they shine individually.