

Reviews

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THEATER REVIEW

More Than Words Can Say

'The Guys,' about a fire captain and journalist working on eulogies after Sept. 11, goes beyond the ordinary.

By SEAN MITCHELL,
Special to The Times

Tim Robbins has returned to the stage of the Actors Gang theater in Hollywood with a full wind of relevance at his back. Paired with Helen Hunt in the topical two-character play "The Guys," by Anne Nelson, about the aftermath of Sept. 11, Robbins honors New York City's fallen firefighters with a quietly commanding performance as a fire department captain struggling to compose eulogies for eight men his company lost in the collapse of the twin towers. Although the show is technically a staged reading, Robbins' portrayal of an ordinary working-class guy thrust into an extraordinary situation is full-scale and begs to be compared with the actor's best work.

The play, the first by Nelson, a journalist, takes its form from the fact that, in the week after Sept. 11, she was called upon to help a real-life fire captain in need of a writer to fashion eulogies of his vanished comrades. When off-Broadway director Jim Simpson asked Nelson to convert that experience into a play, the result was "The Guys," first staged at the Flea Theatre in New York with Bill Murray and Sigourney Weaver.

Nelson wrote herself into the play in the character of a

foreign correspondent-turned-editor who, played here by Hunt, brings the perspective of the educated outsider to the ring of horror at ground zero. Under the direction of the Mark Taper Forum's Robert Egan, Hunt bends her all-American girl image just enough to make us believe she might indeed be a serious writer suddenly calling up all of her talents to help a firefighter find the words to make an awful occasion a little less awful.

Her eyes burning with empathy, she interviews the captain about his men, steering him to reveal who they were and what they did and, in the process, making a connection with a laconic stranger that, by proxy, becomes our own connection.

Performed in less than 90 minutes, without intermission, "The Guys" smartly employs a few serviceable dramatic tricks and surprises. The set is bare except for an area rug and two chairs and end tables, but the script finds ways to get the actors out of their seats and addressing the audience when not addressing each other. Each wears simple clothes: Hunt a black T-shirt and slacks, Robbins a hooded sweatshirt and uniform pants.

The play provides something of a corrective to the inevitable clichés churned out in the



immediate aftermath of the tragedy, and that might be its greatest accomplishment. Searching to find a foothold in the real and human, the beleaguered fire captain admits his own discomfort at all the hype about heroism. "Bill was," he says, struggling for a label to describe one of his men, "Bill was a schmo."

"This is the best job in the world," the captain recalls telling a young recruit who has perished. But now he questions that bromide, asking aloud, "How can I say that in front of his folks?"

Unlike some two-handers, "The Guys" does not draw its energy from conventional debate or a conflict heading toward resolution. But it develops sufficient interest in the cross-cultural collision taking place between the journalist and the firefighter. If this were a movie, they would fall in love and leave their spouses and open a grief-counseling service. This is why we still have the theater.

Robbins marvelously underplays his role as the warmhearted but inarticulate captain, the muscles in his face jostling with inadequacy as he tries in vain to summon an explanation for what happened. In stage-worthy contrast, Hunt is full of words and introspection, turning up the emotional temperature as she reaches out to reassure this bear of a man whose daily job it is to reassure others. Their collaboration comes closest to conflict when the journalist breaks down briefly under the weight of it all, prompting the captain to want to stop. "You don't deserve this!" he says.

Of course, no one deserves this, which is the inescapable theme. It's not a new idea, but Nelson has made the familiar bracing by crafting two memorable characters. There are digressions into the journalist's life covering wars in Latin America that add a political perspective--a subtlety mostly missing from the mainstream coverage of the attacks. This is a welcome attempt to reason

with the unreasonable, but I'm not sure it's clear what we learn from these speeches. Maybe it's not clear to her either.

We do learn a bit about firefighting, about the difference between engines and trucks and ladders. And we learn about the untidy details of creating public memorials to guys who were, well, guys, about whom the truest thing to be said is that one was dependable and another good with his hands.

"Everything the guy built was made out of metal, and it was made right," Robbins says about a member of the company named Bernie. Not a bad epitaph.

