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Broadway

Dr. Sullivan

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Lips Together, Teeth Apart

Terrence McNally's raw play *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* is a phenomenally well written play that centers on two heterosexual couples vacationing amongst a multitude of homosexuals on Fire Island during the peak of the AIDS epidemic. While traversing a very serious topic that plagued millions of Americans in the 1980s, McNally maintains a feeling of levity and keeps the play funny, engaging the audience throughout the whole two and a half hour piece, which is a tall order in theatre. There was always so much happening on the stage that time seemed to fly by; I never felt as though I was sitting in a theatre and watching a play, I just darted from character to character, trying to catch everything that was happening. It was fascinating to watch and experience, especially because I kept thinking about the film *The Normal Heart* throughout the show. Making connections to other works helps me to think critically about what I am seeing, rather than just taking in that which is currently in front of me. McNally created a wonderful piece that left me thinking and eager to watch again.

The whole piece is filled with quick-witted humor, banter between the characters in their attempt to avoid the forbidden topic: AIDS. Their avoidance of not only of AIDS, but also of admitting to infidelity and of a life-threatening illness leads to awkward situations like making excuses for why they won't go into the

swimming pool or why they're so uncomfortable inheriting a house on Fire Island. It was incredibly well balanced on McNally's part, the comedy with the serious. Just when the audience began to get comfortable, he'd slip out of the scene and throw in a monologue. "I have cancer, Sally," repeated several times, or something of equal weight regarding Sally's and John's affair brings us back to reality, that we're dealing with some seriously troubled people who have no idea how to handle any of the situations life has thrown at them.

The biggest issue I had with the show was the extreme chemistry between the brother and sister, Sam and Chloe. It seemed to me that they had more chemistry together than either did with his or her spouse. Perhaps that's what McNally was going for within the show, however; perhaps he wanted the audience to see how couples can struggle. But even in the end with Sam and Sally hug resignedly, I didn't quite buy into their relationship. The chemistry just wasn't there for me. The same applies to Chloe and John's relationship. While I understand that they're under very real stress of coping with John's illness, I didn't feel that the characters truly cared about each other despite the words they said to the audience within their monologues. I felt that John and Sally had the most chemistry romantically, and that was probably the intention because they had an affair. In fact, I was almost pulling for them as a couple.

Ironically, the parts I believed most throughout the play were the moments of comedic relief. When they're all joking around uncomfortably to avoid the real elephants in the room, because there are many. The tension was palpable and that translated extremely well to the audience. But Chloe's incest jokes, John's arrogant

behavior, and Sam's unending curiosity into the possessions that Sally's deceased brother had, like a dildo, kept us all distracted and watching for what would happen next. These moments had audiences laughing out loud, myself included, which is an impressive accomplishment because I typically do not laugh audibly during plays. But the moment between brother and sister where Chloe begs Sam to show his penis to her was too original and funny not to laugh.

But when things got very real at the end and Sally finally exploded, splashing pool water everywhere, it was incredibly satisfying, the climax the audience was craving. Perhaps it was so satisfying because so much is known about the disease today that I desperately wanted the characters to acknowledge it, to understand that they probably weren't going to contract it and certainly not from swimming in a pool. But I appreciated their acceptance at the end that they just might get it but at least they were all suffering together. And once they accepted their fates, the tension dissipated and they were able to actually appreciate the fireworks celebrating Independence Day. I especially appreciated the subtle romance that the relationships rekindle at the end, when Sally talks about how she repeats the mantra, "Lips together, teeth apart," at night to Sam to help him stop grinding his teeth. It gave the ending some positivity, which was much needed after the dramatic climax.

Throughout the show, I kept drawing connections to the film *The Normal Heart*, which also addresses the AIDS epidemic in America. While both the play and this film address the harsh realities of AIDS, they experience it from two different lenses. *The Normal Heart* is a more internal lens, showing audiences how people

within the gay community reacted to AIDS. Mark Ruffalo's character tried desperately to stand up for homosexuals and to get other gay men to heed his warning that AIDS was transmitted through sexual intercourse. But he faced huge amounts of opposition from both straight and gay people, which is interesting because many people assumed the gay community was accepting of the disease. But many were in denial and refused to take the proper precautions. *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* showed the reactions of those outside the gay community. While Sally loved her brother, she could not love the fact that he was gay, no matter how hard she tried. His homosexuality created a wedge in their relationship, a line that could not be crossed. In fact, it created a wedge between all straight and gay people because of the fear and paranoia that ensued due to how little was known about the disease. They took too many precautions, exiling and ostracizing the homosexual community. It was interesting to see a story from a different perspective. I felt as though I could really start to piece together the events and the atmosphere of the 1980s, to understand both aspects.

Terrence McNally's *Lips Together, Teeth Apart* is a touchingly romantic, yet serious drama that guides audiences through a plethora of emotions: humor, sadness, joy, fear, acceptance. The perfect balance of comedy and drama, McNally perfects a play that focuses on a very sensitive subject. His message is resilient, staying with audiences long after the curtain call, and remains relevant and relatable even decades after the events of the play. These characteristics, in my opinion, define a masterpiece and McNally's play will stand the test of time, moving audiences for decades to come.