

## #hero

nytheatre.com review by Anthony Pennino

March 1, 2013

Those familiar with **taxdeductible theatre's** ongoing *Dare Project* are in for a very pleasant surprise when attending the company's first full-length production *#hero*. Whereas the various installments of the *Dare Project* usually (but not always) have traded in a Monty Python-esque absurdist humor, *#hero*, while still preserving some of the anarchic spirit of its predecessors, establishes itself quickly as a harrowing drama and post-modern morality play. Indeed, *#hero* marks the emergence of a vital new contemplative voice on the New York stage.

Interestingly, there is a split in the authorial credit. *#hero* is written by Scott Casper and authored by the company itself. Audience members of the *Dare Project* and company members participated actively in the development process and wrote scenes that though they do not appear and serve as a kind of Apocrypha to the final script nonetheless greatly informed the formation of the final text. This approach is reminiscent of both the development process employed by Joint Stock Theatre Company under the direction of Max Stafford-Clark as well as current trends in the avant-garde art community to democratize and decentralize the idea of the artist.



Robert Larkin in a scene from *#hero* | Nicholas Alexiy Moran

The plot of *#hero* is as simple and clean as an arrow in flight. Norman (Robert Larkin), an off-duty officer of the NYPD, rescues a woman who has fallen onto the tracks of the subway. Suddenly, Norman finds himself at the center of a traditional and social media firestorm to the despair of his long-suffering wife Grace (Wendy Bagger). For a

multitude of complex and ambivalent reasons, they enlist the services of Corey (Bryn Boice), a media consultant, to keep the story “alive”. And so the ongoing fame eats away at Norman’s soul. Yet upon the simple structure of this plot hang riches. *#hero* functions equally well as a social satire, a philosophical investigation, and an emotionally devastating character study.

Kurt Vonnegut once stated, “I think that novels that leave out technology misrepresent life as badly as Victorians misrepresented life by leaving out sex.” The same can be said of stage drama. *#hero* does not make this mistake and fully engages with how technology, particularly social media, has changed our lives. Norman pops up at a press conference with President Obama, a book launch party, a segment of *Dancing with the Stars*, and an advertisement for Subway. Casper skewers the notion of contemporary celebrity mercilessly and deservedly. Even the very American desire that every public happening must also serve as a learning moment is dissected and found wanting. Director Robert W. McMaster and his design team seamlessly integrate multimedia technologies into the production in a way that is organic and not overwhelming. The clever utilization of the space at the Chain Theater and the originality of the design aesthetic, particularly on a showcase’s shoestring budget, often means that *#hero* is successfully punching above its weight.

Yet, this satire of society and technology would not be as strong if it did not rest on the solid foundation of a philosophical or moral inquiry. Larkin expertly portrays a man in constant torment, who stands at the mercy of demons that are never explained but which we feel nonetheless, who finds greater solace in punishment than in celebration, who has lost a sense of himself as a self. He resembles nothing so much here as Immanuel Kant’s philanthropist who seeks to give not from any sense of how it might elevate himself but because he must proceed from duty. His final act, which I do not want to give away, may initially seem reprehensible but ultimately may prove to be the only time Norman acts from a sense of true moral duty. Casper here juxtaposes Norman with Corey, who takes a utilitarian approach to Norman and his story. She proceeds from a need to fulfill both a personal need for uplift as well to provide that same uplift for as many people as possible. Corey as conceived and as played by Boice is not the stereotypical “ballbusting” corporate woman. Rather she wants to do the right thing, but she does not have the tools or the knowledge to do anything more than feed the social media beast. Her arc is one of both poignancy and tragic shadings.

Social satire and ontological investigation are not the whole of *#hero*. At its heart, it dramatizes a very complicated, very nuanced, very specific and thus, paradoxically, very universal marriage. Larkin and Bagger portray a loving but incompatible couple at a crisis point in their marriage. That they do so with such authentic depth of feeling moves the audience from sympathy to empathy for them. Again, I do not wish to give too much away, but there is a moment in the second act when Norman discovers that there are no photographs of the two of them together that is as elegiac as it is wrenching.

The cast is uniformly superlative. Sara Antkowiak, Allyson Briggs, Alex Pappas, and Christopher Sutton all invest their multiple roles with depth and human complication. Larkin honestly and effectively portrays a soul in torment. Bagger owns the stage every time she is on and makes the role of Grace her own. And, finally, Boice inhabits the role of Corey and mines it for all the humor, steel, and pathos that she can find. On a final note, *#hero* marks Boice's swan song on the New York stage as she is moving to Boston at the conclusion of this run. While the theatrical community of Beantown gains a great talent, we here are diminished by this move.