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## ‘Brooklyn Laundry’ Review: Ironing Out Their Differences

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*By Charles Isherwood*

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Rarer than finding a four-leaf clover are the occasions when you leave a play or a movie with the wistful wish that it had been longer. But such is the case with “Brooklyn Laundry,” an endearing, gently moving romantic comedy written and directed by the veteran playwright John Patrick Shanley. Clocking in at a trim hour and a quarter, it comprises just five scenes, but each is a gem, blending the bone-dry humor all the characters share with darker colorings and a steady stream of tersely unpretentious ruminations about life and the problems it inevitably poses.

The love story sparks into life mundanely, when Fran, played by the “Saturday Night Live” alumna Cecily Strong, drops off her laundry at an establishment owned by Owen (David Zayas). Fran is standoffish, rebuffing Owen’s friendly attempts at light banter. Slightly miffed, Owen remarks that she reminds him of his ex-fiancée: “Smart, one inch from terrific, but gloomy.” The sharp-tempered Fran takes offense. “I don’t think I’m gloomy,” she snaps. “I think what I’m suffering from is reality.” But when Owen bluntly asks her to dinner, a disarmed Fran agrees.

We soon learn at least some of the reality from which Fran suffers. The second scene takes place in the mobile home of her older sister Trish (Florencia Lozano), who is in hospice care, dying from a brain tumor. But as written by Mr. Shanley, and played by the terrific Ms. Lozano, Trish seems allergic to self-pity. Even as her life nears its end, she sees it with clarity and humor. When Fran grouses about Trish’s ex-husband, a former drug addict, Trish says: “But give me credit, you know? I did divorce him. Twice.” In just this single scene, Ms. Lozano brings her character to vivid, funny life; the pathos of Trish’s situation—she is just 48 years old and has two young children—seems almost an afterthought to her. She’s more concerned about what Fran will make of herself, and encourages her to take more drugs; Trish is enjoying the happy dreams the painkillers she’s taking bring about.

Ms. Strong imbues Fran with a brooding flintiness. But she also brings crackling bite to her bitter humor: “Why doesn’t anything like that happen to me?” she says when Owen reveals that he bought his three laundries after a settlement from a car accident. And as Fran slowly begins to strip away her carapace of pessimism, under the influence of Owen’s attention, and also, in the play’s funniest scene, under the influence of the hallucinogenic mushrooms that she impulsively took before their first date, Ms. Strong adds shadings of vulnerability to her portrait.

Fran's low-grade unhappiness is built on a foundation of fears that her life, and life in general, is an unrewarding business, dooming all to disappointment.

Mr. Zayas is likewise superb. Although Owen claims to scorn romanticism—"It robs people of their actual lives," he says—Mr. Zayas infuses the character with an earthy charm that is directly tied to his openness about his hopes and anxieties; Owen freely tells Fran that his fiancée left because his accident didn't just bring a windfall, but also a bad back that impinged on their sex life.

The fourth character is Fran's other older sister, Susie (Andrea Syglowski), who tries to cajole an unwilling Fran to make another visit to Trish. Fran initially resists, determined to pursue her budding relationship with Owen, to prioritize her life, she feels, instead of subordinating it to her family's demands. But Susie, played with a slightly rattled zealotry by Ms. Syglowski, upends Fran's plan with a startling and sad revelation.

It's a credit to the commitment of Manhattan Theatre Club, which has produced many of Mr. Shanley's plays (including his Pulitzer Prize winner "Doubt," a revival of which opens on Broadway next week), that it has given Mr. Shanley's comparatively slight if virtually perfect play such a first-class production. Not only is the play cast with care—for which Mr. Shanley as director deserves credit—but the set designs, by Santo Loquasto, are marvels of realistic detail.

The only flaw I found in "Brooklyn Laundry" is perhaps a retrograde notion underpinning the plot, the idea that a woman's life is truly fulfilled only by finding a loving (male) partner. And yet Mr. Shanley has drawn all three of the play's female characters with an emphasis on their strength of character; the sisters bristle with intelligence, wit and a firm will.

The play's central theme may be a familiar one—*carpe diem*, more or less—but it is given fresh life from the brisk humor of the writing and embodied by characters with a gruff grittiness. And while "Brooklyn Laundry" finds Mr. Shanley writing more in the lively comic mode of his Oscar-winning "Moonstruck" rather than the dense moral conflict of "Doubt," the play nevertheless contains seams of darkness. Its ultimate message combines romance and realism: Life may not be all it might be or all we hope it could be, but it is all we have—and as such is infinitely valuable.