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Lucky Plush Productions Makes “Better” Best with “The Better Half”

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The Better Half – Lucky Plush

Lucky Plush Productions’ *The Better Half* is a mind-bending (and body-bending) metatheatrical deconstruction of domestic relationships. Born of adapting *Gaslight*, written by Patrick Hamilton, *Scenes from a Marriage*, written and directed by Ingmar Bergman, and other texts, this production supercharges the hope, hurt, trust and treason of romance with inspiring movement, choreographed with deft precision and narrative significance by Julia Rhoads.

Originally devised by Lucky Plush’s ensemble of 2011, (many of whom return for this production) *The Better Half* follows a nameless group of movers performing an adaptation of the script to *Gaslight* in an empty studio; they devise movement and impromptu dialogue based around *Gaslight*’s themes, likely similar to Lucky Plush’s own ensemble crafting such a piece. Ensemble members pair awkward, ordinary dialogue with athletic movements and contortions for great comedic effect, which is further expounded upon with the confusion of material, given that the script reader is incredibly vague as he reads the screenplay. No player has any definitive idea of what their characters are like; they only figure out the names of the characters and figure out *who* they are on the fly. Confusion of identity only worsens as certain players introduce dialogue from another script entirely – a rule hidden from other ensemble members that nonetheless passes, complicating the thickening plot through new context. The leading lady (known within the play as “Mrs. Manningham”) comes to enjoy comfort in her budding relationship with the leading man, (in this piece known as “Mr. Manningham”) which he obviously fails to reciprocate as he believes that all relationships in this devising session are specifically in service of the script – which few of the ensemble members have actually read. Mr. and Mrs. Manningham’s relationship directly mirrors that of the players’, as trust is built and subsequently destroyed by paranoia and miscommunication. Each player operates under different rules than the others in the room, and conflict is born of the discord regarding rules and vocabularies. Such conflict – and subsequent synthesis – is often demonstrated through forms of weight sharing; lifts and falls follow the emotional highs and lows. Script samples keep changing, relationships grow and trust is rebuilt, and Mr. and Mrs. Manningham come to rest, familiarly discussing whether they can or should love one another.



A shocking, challenging, and deeply affecting story from beginning to end, *The Better Half* must be seen to be believed, in particular because a greater part of the storytelling is visual; movement and choreography is the one common language of all involved in this near-farcical tale of psychological intrigue.

Co-directors Julia Rhoades and Leslie Buxbaum Danzig have delicately devised an engrossing journey from the uncomfortable unknown of strangerhood to the familiar comfort (and chaos) of marriage. The movement patterns and motifs they establish are not only athletic, but emotionally dynamic over time. Even when the play is rife with confusion, throughlines of movement make the action and relationships easy to follow and understand. Every square inch of Steppenwolf's 1700 Theater space is used to the utmost efficiency, as actors roll, slide, flip and tip toe into every corner. Despite the non-existence of the set and the intimacy of the space, place is clearly established in every scene through specific floor patterns and the encouragement of play. Actors trip over invisible objects and fall down pantomimed stairs, highlighting humor of the absurd through specific directorial rules. The direction is amplified tenfold by the prowess and skill of the actors.

Adrian Danzig is enticingly awkward and endearingly tactless as "Mr. Manningham," commanding the stage with his large presence — accomplished through his literal size, and his subtle use of posture. Danzig remains grounded to the floor, his shoulders slouch slightly and he enters the performance apologetically. His feet fall heavily on the floor to indicate his slight obliviousness; however, this choice also subtly hints at the man's underlying power. Danzig manifests this strength as the performance continues. "Mr. Manningham" is meant to be domineering and mysterious, so the once-oafish player becomes more domineering and irate, placing strain on his relationship to the other players. Danzig expands his command of the room, broadening his shoulders, increasing his volume and stature, nearly dwarfing scene partners as he acquiesces space on stage. That is not to say that Danzig is a selfish actor; rather, he is understanding of who to be and when — one moment a clownish sweetheart, the next a tyrant. Danzig's malleability of character is incredibly interesting.

Julia Rhoads shines as "Mrs. Manningham," sensitively approaching her trusting character with tenderness and flexibility (literally and figuratively). This tenderness and flexibility is juxtaposed with utter confusion and the desperate pursuit of support to great effect; Rhoads is a master of finding opposites in each choice she makes. In her hope there is subtle despair, in her longing there is kindness. The warm timbre of Rhoads voice accentuates her capacity for trust, as the apparent malleability of her body accentuates her ability to physically manifest any emotional state. The result is one of the most accepting and receptive scene partners on stage, given how effectively she is able to respond to stimulus physically and emotionally. The subtlety of her action choices provides a very effective contrast for moments of physical comedy; while Rhoads invests the audience in her emotional journey, she falls down invisible stairs or gets her body tangled in lifts for great comedic effect.

"Elizabeth" is played with mischievous energy quirky humor by Meghann Wilkinson. Wilkinson is consistently entertaining through her ability to energetically accept whatever energy she is given. As Mr. and Mrs. Manningham conflict and argue, Wilkinson is able to take the tense energy of the room and flip it on its head with humor; her large eyes are very expressive, and her posture is constantly energized and lifted, lending an air of readiness to everything she experiences. Ultimately, Wilkinson plays with the subversion of circumstances as a means of comic relief that relies on opposites. Wilkinson engages with the world this play through surprising opposite choices, and the self-serving nature of "Elizabeth" accentuates Wilkinson's own desire to turn the performance on its head. Wilkinson's physical flexibility allows her to perform many of the same tasks as Rhoades, yet her comedically subversive personality makes her an excellent foil to Rhoades' tender acceptance of those around her.

Raheim White sassily inhabits the character of "Nancy," embodying the playfulness of a nineteen-year-old girl with the independence of a thirty-year-old man. White approaches everything with acute curiosity and as such, makes effective and interesting discoveries throughout the performance. White is particularly adept at accepting circumstances and running with them; moreover, he applies clear opinions to every circumstance he accepts, making him a dynamic participant of every scene. An excellent dancer as well, White powerfully overtakes the stage in the absence of scene partners, demonstrating the extent of his curiosity through his variations on movement motifs of other characters as he playfully impersonates other cast members.

Michel Rodríguez Cintra approaches this work with flustered bombast and athletic ability. Functioning as the script reader in the first half of the play, Cintra enigmatically induces intrigue through ambiguity; that is to say, he plays with the mystery of things unsaid, reacting to the flustered confusion of the other players. As Cintra enters the play space as "Detective Rough," he supercharges the energy of the stage with his frenetic curiosity. Flipping, running, squatting and rolling, Cintra is incredibly active, using his energy as a means of directing the action of the players; his scene partners respond to his physicality by amplifying their own. Cintra's athleticism applies physical levels to each action he performs; ergo, his performance is visually spectacular and dynamic.

Composition and sound design by Mikhail Fiksel is moving and well-incorporated into the production, as it provides impetus for inspired movement and reflects the emotional stakes of the each scene. Fiksel's sound design also expands the devised environment of the stage, as knocks and door buzzer effects authentically build the imagined physical space.



Lighting design by Heather Gilbert masterfully inhabits the space with the actors. Squares of light create perimeters of movement for actors to play within, lights serve as stepping stones to guide actors from one place to another — Gilbert becomes an unseen scene partner through

her design. Given that illumination is a particularly relevant concept in a play built around miscommunication, Gilbert's design also serves to mirror the relationships of characters: fractured and geometric one moment, dark and subdued the next, bright and cheery another.

A moving visual spectacle, Lucky Plush Productions' *The Better Half* is a topical dissection of human interaction; masterfully directed, performed, and designed, this production is sure to incite meaningful discussion and reevaluation of relationships and emotional needs. *The Better Half* is as much a teaching tool on communication as it is a beautiful

work of art.

Highly Recommended

Reviewed by Quinn Rigg

Lucky Plush Productions presents "The Better Half" through November 17th at the Steppenwolf 1700 Theatre, 1700 N. Halsted, Chicago, IL. For more information and tickets, call (312) 335-1650, or visit <https://www.steppenwolf.org/tickets--events/seasons/2018-19/the-better-half/> (<https://www.steppenwolf.org/tickets--events/seasons/2018-19/the-better-half/>).

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