

Review: 'Hir' @ Shakespeare & Company, 9/21/18

By [Steve Barnes](#)

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Elizabeth Aspenlieder and Adam Huff in rehearsal for Shakespeare & Company's "Hir." Photo by: Katie McKellick

Lenox, Mass.

Black comedies don't get much darker and sharper than "Hir." It's like a double-sided shard of obsidian, slicing through both liberal pieties and old-fashioned notions about

gender as it plays a California family that is unhappy in its own very distinctive way, in its own very messy living room.

Being presented in a superlative production as the final summer show at Shakespeare & Company, "Hir" is by Taylor Mac, a writer and performing artist who explodes convention, blurs genres and defies categorization. Mac, whose preferred gender pronoun is "judy," wrote a sequel to "Titus Andronicus" that is headed for Broadway with Nathan Lane and Andrea Martin, won a MacArthur "Genius" grant, has had plays including the 4-year-old "Hir" produced hundreds of times around the world and once performed a 24-hour concert featuring music from every decade between 1776 and 2016.

For "Hir," Mac sets the wars over gender identity and expression right smack in the middle of a contemporary California family – two parents and two late-adolescent offspring who live in a working-class development, built over a former landfill, that is full of starter homes from which few of the residents were ever able to upsize. They're on a dump, and their house looks like a dump, because the mother (Shakespeare & Company veteran Elizabeth Aspenlieder) has given up on most forms of domesticity. Since her husband – a former plumber, he was abusive physically, verbally and emotionally – had a stroke, she has refused to use cupboards, drawers, shelves or anything else designed to keep the stuff of a house in its place. The sight of the living room and kitchen, mounded with laundry and dishes overflowing, greets the audience and brings murmurs of disbelief as they file in; some also applaud at the end of intermission, when the stage crew finishes cleaning it up for the second act. (The set, and presumably the clutter, are by Carolyn Mraz.)

As the play starts, the father (John Hadden, a Shakespeare & Company founding member) is in a nightgown, outlines of diaper visible beneath, crude makeup smearing his face and a multicolored fright wig on his head. He comprehends fine but speaks minimally, sleeps in a box in the living room and receives a water blast from a spray bottle his wife keeps holstered at her waist for when she's displeased with him. To further her revenge-emasculatation of him, she doses estrogen into the a whirred-up glop of his other medications that he drinks several times a day. With the former beast tamed, she concentrates on her youngest, a 17-year-old named Maxine at birth who is largely transitioned to the "trans-masculine" Max (Jack Doyle) and longs to escape to a queer commune he's read about online.

Into this maelstrom walks the family's flabbergasted first-born, Isaac (Adam Huff), who's about 21 and was booted from the Marines for a drug habit after a few years spent collecting body parts and corpses of his fellow soldiers. Not strong communicators over long distances, the family makes up for it with ferocious face-to-face arguments, staged by director Alice Reagan with an ear for Mac's rhythms and an eye for patterns among the chaos.

The only way to get through material this heavy and lines so abundant is to propel them with speed and loft; the cruelties and ultimate devastation would be unbearable if given full weight by dramatic delivery. Though the cast is uniformly excellent, Aspenlieder shines brightest among otherwise equals with a comedic acumen that has never been better, which in Aspenlieder's case is really saying something. Doyle is sympathetic and still a bit of a moody, bratty teen as Max, Huff excels as the seemingly most "normal" of the bunch, still irreparably warped by his family, and Hadden's control as the stroke-addled father is masterful, never turning a man who at first seems a caricature into a living cartoon.

For viewers who find humor in expertly performed domestic horror and hot-button contemporary issues, "Hir" is a blisteringly funny, smart and even important work. That's about two-thirds of the theater audiences I know. The other third is well warned to stay away.

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If you go

Theater Review

"Hir"

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday

Where: Bernstein Theatre, Shakespeare & Company, 70 Kemble St., Lenox, Mass.

Running time: One hour, 45 minutes; one intermission

Continues: 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday, 3 p.m. Saturday and Sunday; through Oct. 7

Tickets: \$30 to \$65

Info: 413-637-3353 or shakespeare.org