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BWW Reviews: Gordon Goodman Channels John Barrymore Into Reality Onstage at Greenway Court

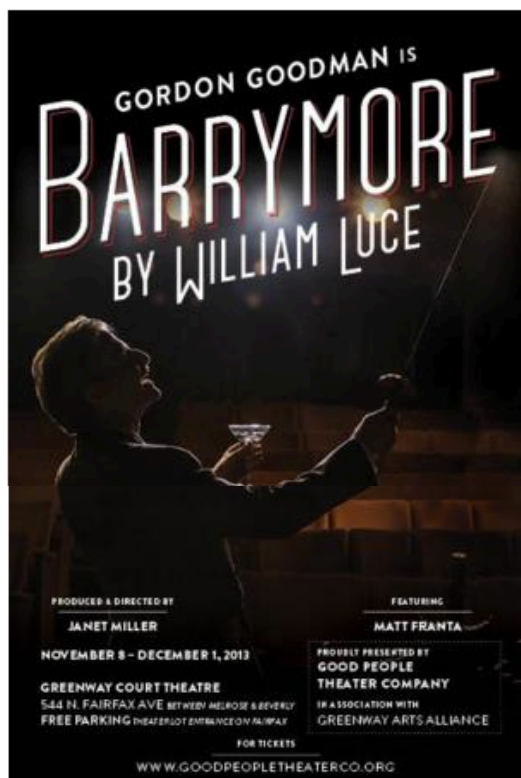
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by Shari Barrett

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"If only Eve had given Adam a daiquiri, we'd still be in paradise," ruminates Gordon Goodman as John Barrymore at the end of BARRYMORE by William Luce. To that I say, "If only John Barrymore could have stopped drinking, what acting heights could he have gone on to reach?"

Good People Theater Company presents William Luce's BARRYMORE, produced and directed with reverence by Janet Miller. It's 1942, on the bare stage of an empty New York theater just three months after Pearl Harbor. We arrive, expecting Barrymore to run lines with his loyal prompter Frank (played by Matt Franta whose off-stage remarks are spot-on comical and biting) for a reprise of Richard III - the part that elevated Barrymore from matinee idol to serious Shakespearean actor in 1920 when he was 38 years old.

But instead we have cocktails, gossip about his siblings Lionel and Ethel, and the occasional snippet from a Shakespearean masterpiece as we slowly circle in on the darker truth: that the end is near for one of America's greatest stage actors who complains when he gets out of bed now, his creaking bones sound lie Carmen Miranda's castanets. He freely admits, "I've had one helluva life - for a man who's been dead fifteen years."



I've got to hand it to **Janet Miller** for brilliantly casting the uber-talented Gordon Goodman in the title role as he Barrymore-handsome and believably disappears into the role from moment to moment. Trust me - you will forget you are not really watching Barrymore comment on his life as Goodman embodies not just the physical characteristics of Barrymore from his shaking hands to his stumbling walk, but also the actor's frustration at his inability to remember lines, his wonder and reverence for his four wives, right down to his dark and tormented soul only at ease with a drink in his hand. "My biggest regret," states Barrymore, "is not being able to sit in the audience and watch myself." If he were still alive today, he could do just that watching Goodman channel him onstage.

But why take on this challenging role? Goodman confesses a long fascination with **John Barrymore**, the man and the actor. "I remember seeing him in the movie *Grand Hotel* when I was younger and being struck by the charming ease of his performance. As I investigated his story, I learned he was enormously gifted in fine arts, in writing, and in acting. For me, he became a very interesting case study in the complexities of a truly creative - if slightly out of control - life. Barrymore became a character I really wanted to play, to live inside, especially as I've gotten older. When Janet called to suggest the project, it was as if she'd been reading my mind."

For an actor who wants to challenge himself, the richness of Barrymore's personality is a hook. "Jack Barrymore was a real celebrity, but he was no plaster saint. Alcoholism and his reluctant participation in the Barrymore 'family business' led to an erratic track record, on stage and off." But Goodman notes Barrymore's Shakespeare "broke new ground for realism in American acting. That work was astonishing at the time and, without question, he established himself as one of our greatest stage artists."

Sadly, as Goodman points out, Barrymore's antics in later year - the many wives, the raucous lifestyle, his blue sense of humor - flattened his reputation into the cliché of an inebriated has-been. "But **William Luce's** play gives the memory of **John Barrymore** redemption. It's a beautifully written, loving character study that becomes an ideal vehicle for realism, for presenting the deeper dimensions of a real person's life on stage."

See **BARRYMORE** and witness a performance that honors the complexity of Barrymore's life, an honest account of the man, his charms, doubts and imperfections that make Barrymore, despite his faults, admirable and even loveable. Hurry and order tickets as the run ends Sunday, December 1.

Presented in association with Greenway Arts Alliance, **BARRYMORE** plays at the Greenway Court Theater, 544 N. Fairfax between Melrose and Beverly for three weekends from November 15 to December 1 (Fridays at 8pm, Saturdays at 2pm and 8pm and Sundays at 7pm.) Tickets are \$25 (\$15 for the November 8 preview) and are on sale now online at www.GoodPeopleTheaterCo.org or by calling the Box Office at Greenway Court: 323-655-7679 ext. 100. Parking is free in the theater's lot (entrance on Fairfax).

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