

Continental Divide is the collective title for two new plays, Mothers Against and Daughters of the Revolution by English playwright David Edgar. Both plays were jointly commissioned and produced by the Oregon Shakespeare Festival and directed by Tony Taccone—the Berkeley Rep’s artistic director who previously directed Edgar’s Pentecost in 1997. The two plays in Continental Divide share issues and characters but happily offer variety in focus and dramaturgy. Mothers Against is an intense chamber piece about Sheldon Vine (Bill Geisslinger)—Republican candidate for governor of an unspecified Pacific coast state—as he prepares for a debate. Daughters of the Revolution on the other hand is an expansive epic theatre play about the diaspora of 1960s student radicals and introduces Vine’s Democratic opponent, Rebecca McKeene (a fine performance by Demetra Pittman in a minor role).

Mothers Against resembles Edgar’s The Shape of the Table (1990) and Pentecost (1994) in exploring political conflicts in confined spaces. It is a self-conscious old-fashioned political melodrama about principles of conduct and the drive to win elections by any means necessary. In a story within which a gubernatorial race once thought a lost cause for the Republicans turns into a contest that is too close to call, the play pits free-marketers or newer social issue voters against social conservatives or traditional old money base within the GOP. Ironically, fiscal conservative Sheldon Vine’s jump in the polls arises from voter ignorance of his true, relatively liberal position on two interconnected hot-button issues: the shooting of an eco-terrorist by a Latino security guard and “Proposition 92.” The latter is a loyalty oath that would make it illegal for registered voters to support a group that pursues its ends through force. However, securing the necessary votes to win the election exposes ideological rifts in the campaign team. His handlers struggle to position the candidate on these matters while maintaining his approval ratings, trying as much as they could, not to betray the candidate’s beliefs. Edgar injects dynastic struggles into this mix as Sheldon’s campaign manager and older brother, Mitch, is resentful of being passed over for the candidacy because of his seeming mismanagement of the family fortune, while Sheldon’s daughter, Deborah, may know more than she reveals about the slain eco-terrorist.

Mothers Against is packed with moral choices in a narrative within which multiple conversations and actions occur simultaneously. However, in his effort to anatomize thoroughly the Republican Party, Edgar over-reaches by piling on too many issues, too many haunted characters, and too many big secrets—all inadequately prioritized. Watching Mothers Against is like being a novice viewer dropped into the middle of an exceptionally heated episode of The West Wing. The audience desperately clings to every word and gesture in an attempt to follow the political maneuverings, which, in this case, are obscured by the breathless pace of the OSF production. Whereas on the printed page, the plot is fairly clear, this is not so onstage. While one can sympathize with director Taccone’s choice of speed over clarity, the audience is frequently left behind. With a three-hour running time, some thought might have been given to streamlining Edgar’s text.

Another casualty of Edgar’s efforts to address every issue besetting the Republican Party is characterization: no one in this play emerges as a genuinely interesting individual. The same might be said for Daughters of the Revolution, but merely functional characters do less damage to its epic scope. To make the heavy weight of personal and family history in Mothers Against dramatically gripping depends upon the emergence of compelling personalities. Edgar’s failure to achieve this handicaps the performances, which in their briskness...
became stagy. The problem is less evident in the smaller roles; Tony DeBruno’s Mitch, and Robynn Rodriguez’s Connie, Sheldon’s wife, are spared the long, rhetorically polished speeches given to other characters, and consequently their performances are more believable. One might have imagined that a Shakespeare Festival would be the perfect place to premiere a long wordy play about manipulation and vendettas. But perhaps the ideal venue would be the Shaw Festival, for Mothers Against resembles nothing so much as a Harley Granville-Barker play, with its elliptical dialogue and complicated marriage of political morality and family tensions.

Edgar is on more familiar territory in Daughters of the Revolution, the Democratic half of Continental Divide, and the result is a more entertaining work. I saw Daughters second and felt that not only was it the easier of the two plays to follow, but it also illuminated some of the more obscure points of Mothers Against. OSF’s publicity says that these are intended as stand-alone plays to be seen in any order but I found myself wishing I had seen Daughters first.

Daughters of the Revolution resembles Edgar’s epic theatre plays for the RSC—Destiny (1976) and Maydays (1983), especially Act I which trips along in a series of episodes guided by sliding panels, projected titles, and a coup de théâtre materialization of a redwood forest. The story is schematic but serviceable: Michael Bern, an ex-1960s student radical turned community college dean, receives his old FBI file as a joke-birthday gift. The file reveals that one of Michael’s former comrades must have been an FBI informant. The play then evolves into a detective story as Michael seeks out the mole by interviewing his old colleagues. Michael’s quest allows Edgar to examine the recent history of the Left in America. Edgar is at his best juxtaposing the political history. Since the 1990s, Edgar’s plays revealed him to be an incisive commentator on English political history. Since the 1990s, with The Shape of the Table and Pentecost, Edgar seems to have turned away from English subjects to analyze the international scene. Now with Continental Divide, England’s loss is America’s gain.

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TAKE ME OUT. By Richard Greenberg. The Public Theater, New York City. 6 October 2002

The deliciously punny title of Richard Greenberg’s most recent play invokes both the rich mythology that makes baseball an irresistible subject for writers in search of the American grain, as well as the violence, however muted and coded, that shoves up constructions of American masculinity. The play, which moved to New York’s Public Theatre after a critically acclaimed run at London’s Donmar Warehouse, where it was part of an “American Imports” season, chronicles the immediate aftermath of an event that is (alas unsurprisingly) still fictional: a professional baseball player’s coming out as a homosexual.

The player is Darren Lemming (another pun, perhaps, infinitely more cynical?), of mixed race, god-like physique, and almost terrifying self-confidence, star of the Empires (Yankee look-alikes to his Derek Jeter impression). His teammates supply the play with a gallery of American male types, including dumb jocks, sensitive athletes, and alienated automatons. More surprisingly and delightfully, they also make up a bountiful chorus of varied voices and verbal styles: the lucid self-accounting of Lemming himself (superbly played by Daniel Sunjata), the sub-verbal grunts of his nemesis Shane Mungitt (Frederick Weller), the cliché-ridden paranoia of Todd Kovitz (Dominic Fumusa), the earnest narration of the well-meaning Kippy Sunderstrom (Neal Huff), the strange archaisms of his pious best friend Davey Battle (Kevin Carroll), even the untranslated Spanish and Japa-