

An attempt to grasp the whole: *One World*, a play by Robert Litz, opens in Hollywood

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One World, Robert Litz's two-act play at the Elephant Theatre in Hollywood, has been extended for two weeks. Not bad for a play whose political content and social commentary the director/producer originally thought would make audiences walk out.

One World is that rare American theatrical specimen: an ambitious play of ideas which examines the nature of international capitalism and globalization—and has, with one exception, developed, emotional characters who represent the entire human spectrum.

Litz's work shows us the psychological effects and physical ravages on different social classes, including different sections of the American working-class, peoples of the underdeveloped world, and the financial “analysts” who make their living by downsizing the work force and transferring operations overseas.

As the title implies, *One World* takes on the whole world; characters representing almost every continent take center stage at one time or another. From a factory worker in China, to a Haitian immigrant in New York, to an illegal immigrant from Mexico, to a Nigerian peddler, they tell their stories, of their dreams, hopes, aspirations and despair—all bearing up with great will and resolution, despite low wages and deplorable working conditions.

For once an American playwright, even if his vision is limited (more on this farther down), tries to break the barriers of American provincialism and see beyond the borders of the US. The play shows us, in a compelling theatrical way, that the problems facing people today are international in scope and influence.

The characters are psychologically individualized, yet some form a type of Greek chorus that weaves in and out of the main action, which consists of the efforts of three American families to keep their heads above water: a white working-class couple; their black counterpart, albeit poorer; and a socially-climbing financial analyst, his wife and daughter.

The analyst specializes—and takes great pride—in helping corporations “downsize” and move their operations overseas to maximize profits. He precipitates the action when the New Jersey corporation he works for decides, on his advice, to move overseas. Ironically, he loses his job and he eventually calls his

new situation among the unemployed “poetic justice.” The scene in which he is fired is edged in acid and rings true.

The corporate action directly and indirectly affects the two other couples. Their lives intertwine and bisect in a series of scenes that show the psychological influence of class forces on all concerned. In the end, the violence that ensues is understandable; they are all victims, even the analyst, of globalized capitalism.

One of the positive facts about *One World* is that it presents an all-too-rare forum for the discussion of ideas that matter in people's lives. Moreover, almost all of the characterizations seem psychologically true. Unlike most films and plays of the past several decades, in which the vast majority of characters are like atoms floating in space with no relation whatsoever to daily reality or social class and, therefore, are psychologically incomplete or shallow, the thoughts and actions of Mr. Litz's characters are organically tied to their circumstances and make psychological sense.

Even the financial analyst, whose main objective in life is to sell his soul to the corporate devil, becomes a victim. As he becomes proletarianized, he becomes understandable: a cog in a machine. As the three families become interrelated, they collide, at one point violently, but never gratuitously. Litz makes clear that if we are to understand these characters at all, we must understand their environment, their social class, their daily lives.

For a play of ideas satirizing and critical of the system, especially one with a “leftist” tinge, this is no small accomplishment. Most plays with such a bent, in their zeal to portray the evils of capitalism, become mere pamphlets, their characters cardboard cutouts who have no resemblance to human beings and have no other dramatic purpose than to speak for the author himself. This is not generally the case here. The characters' universality is touching; they are rounded creations whose emotional lives touch us.

They are very much tied to their world, which exerts its influence on their relationships. As Mr. Litz states in a program note:

“My source material was conversations with folks on the streets, in coffee shops and bars, on picket and check-out lines, in hardware stores and junkyards, dinner parties, wedding

receptions, travels through the Americas and Asia, and even one peculiar conversation with a night-shift tech support guy in New Delhi.”

But there is one exception to Litz’s human characters: the incorrigibly caustic and pitiless Mr. IMF, who functions as a sort of *Our Town* stage manager. No folksy creation he, the very figure, made concrete, of the naked, rapacious greed of capitalist globalization; a distillation of international imperialism itself. He weaves in and out the action like a hungry cobra, uttering sarcastic remarks about the characters and their plights, taking immense pleasure in their suffering, singing the praises of the drive for corporate profit, no matter what the human cost, as the ultimate and necessary high. This character is, of course, not only an idea or an abstraction through which Mr. Litz vents his spleen against corporate greed. He also functions as a dramatic device which ties all the separate stories into a whole, so that what the audience sees is an *entire* world on the stage.

Brendan Connor, an actor who has mastered the art of listening to other players on stage, plays him with great élan and panache. The rest of the cast of 14, many of whom double and triple, are uniformly excellent. They deserve to be mentioned by name: Robert Brewer, Don Cesario, Jade Dornfeld, Mim Drew, Keith Ewell, Nicole Fazzio, Terence Flack, Cheryl Huggins, Dan McCoy, Patty Onagan, Tim Starks, Tara Thomas and Marco Villalvazo.

Director David Fofi’s staging is excellent. He has managed, through the skillful use of movement (with the exception of a few blocking mistakes that mar the action) and set design to connect all the disparate (geographically) elements into one coherent whole, making what could have been a tediously complicated script easy to follow—the better to serve its ideas.

As intellectually challenging and emotionally honest as *One World*, however, it does not *fully* satisfy—precisely in the realm of ideas. For even if Mr. Litz’s characters are real, involving and sympathetic, his play is still primarily one of ideas, specifically about a social system which he portrays as pitiless and irredeemable. Why, then, not follow this to its logical conclusion, that is, at least entertain the idea that it must be replaced? But Mr. Litz hedges, as if he himself were conflicted: reform or revolution?

Of course, he is in no way obligated to provide solutions, else the play be nothing but a piece of agitprop with an in-your-face agenda. But Mr. Litz must nevertheless be held accountable to his logic: after all the dislocation and suffering, is the solution that love and understanding are the only ways to deal with the situation? After all, one of the last images is that of the smiling African American and white workers having found a kind of unconscious, friendly class solidarity after finding new jobs on the docks.

They continue their lives, but surely not the wiser and certainly just as passively. To them, the system remains an incomprehensible mess; in fact, they don’t even express an

inkling of understanding it. Nary a voice is raised in protest except that of the Anarchist, who is probably the most underdeveloped of all the characters; his observations barely register, and when they do, they grate. The fact that the only protest voice belongs to an anarchist, not a socialist, speaks volumes.

Mr. Litz himself has stated that “whatever its ‘message,’ at the very least this production seems to be saying that like it or not, we are living in a smaller, faster, tougher, far more interconnected world than we’ve ever known; and it seems to be saying that surviving its pressures may be difficult, but simple decency, human kindness, and mutual respect still have the power to give us the heart to go on....”

This simply will not do, given the play’s premises and vitriolic criticism of capitalism. One suspects that, when all is said and done, Mr. Litz still has faith, tenuous though it may be, in the system’s ability to reform itself—if only the people who run it could find their moral compass again; that the system, as bad as it is, is a betrayal of the ideals which established it, not the logical outcome of objective economic laws.

One World, for all its strengths—genuine anger, an internationalist outlook, a deep sympathy for the oppressed and heart-felt sincerity, not to mention theatricality—in the end remains straitjacketed by middle class radicalism, which is nothing but reformism dressed in wolf’s clothing. Yes, it is a horrible system, Mr. Litz seems to be saying. Why not just simply get rid of the bad and keep the good? Wishful thinking! Truly more utopian than socialism has ever been accused of.

Nevertheless, Mr. Litz’s play shows considerable courage in its exploration of this vast world. *One World* is quite rare in present-day American theatre, which, like film, functions, more often than not, as a narcotic. It offers a plethora of ideas and issues for debate and discussion regarding the very fate of humanity.

One World, at the Elephant Theater, 6322 Santa Monica Boulevard (one block west of Vine) in, Hollywood, CA.



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