

September 19, 2007

**BOOKS**

# Enduring Gatsby

The Whole Thing, Cover to Cover, in One Night

by CHRISTOPHER FRIZZELLE

## Gatz

On the Boards

Sept 21–23.

This weekend, Elevator Repair Service, an experimental theater group from New York City, is reading the entirety of *The Great Gatsby* at On the Boards—start to finish, the whole book, every sentence. Three times. They're doing it on Friday at 5:00 p.m., on Saturday at 4:00 p.m., and on Sunday at 4:00 p.m. *Gatz* is advertised at six hours long but goes slightly longer than that. There are small breaks throughout and a big break halfway through for you to go get dinner; in between, hours and hours of sitting. It's an anaerobic endurance sport.

It's also inspired. There just isn't a better way of dealing theatrically with *The Great Gatsby*, a book you can pick up on a random afternoon and tell yourself you're just going to spend 20 minutes with and then, hours later, still be holding, your plans for the day gone... somewhere. *The Great Gatsby* is a perfect prose performance, which is why staging always ruins it. No amount of money (Seattle Rep spent tons of money on costumes and extras and a car to come out onstage for their adaptation last year) can accomplish what a single great Fitzgerald sentence can. *The Great Gatsby* starring actors? They'll just be in the way. *The Great Gatsby* starring the sentences in *The Great Gatsby*? Oh hell yeah. If an experimental theater group from New York City can *do* it—like, if it's physically possible—I am certainly going to be there.

Turns out I'm not going to be here this weekend, so I went to Portland last weekend to see *Gatz* at the Time-Based Art Festival. Here's how the TBA program describes the show: "One morning in the low-rent office of a mysterious small business, one employee finds a ragged old copy of *The Great Gatsby* in the clutter of his desk and starts to read it out loud. And doesn't stop. At first his coworkers hardly seem to notice, but then weird coincidences start happening in the office, one after another, until it's no longer clear whether he's reading the book or the book is doing something to him...."

The premise works, mostly because Scott Shepherd—who plays the guy who reads the book out loud and so becomes Nick Carraway, the novel's narrator—is incredible. Shepherd reads the whole thing, except for dialogue spoken by other characters, and he strikes a pitch-perfect blankness that's both suited to the long haul (the way he reads isn't the way you've ever heard anyone read a

---

Great Work of Literature) and suited to his character. He's pretty unmusical about it. When he reads, on the second page, "Only Gatsby, the man who gives his name to this book..." he stops and looks at the cover of the book, and the audience, all of whom would do the same thing if they were reading it, laughs with recognition. There are lots of moments like this—right when there's a bang in the book, there's a coincidental bang in the office. John Collins, the director, has built a marvel of levels.

Sadly, he hasn't built a cast of equal talents. I didn't understand Susie Sokol's performance as Jordan Baker at all—constantly mugging, constantly pantomiming the descriptions in the book, she comes across not at all like the languidly amoral mystery she's supposed to be and something much closer to a cartoon-Woodstock-meets-Mona-from-*Who's-the-Boss?* figure. As the hours go by, the characters lose their office identities and just start acting out the book. It's as if Collins doesn't fully trust his own idea, and it kind of becomes a mess, that pantomiming-Fitzgerald's-description stuff happening a lot, never successfully, even when the better actors do it. The result is something like a sitcom, and at crucial moments, like when Daisy is admiring Gatsby's shirts, the very moment in the book when everything turns, the actors seem to be making fun of the material.

You become convinced that, what with all the things they're fucking up, they're going to fuck up the end, but then the end comes and the writing is more brilliant than you remember and they don't fuck it up one bit. Of course, you're now slightly delirious. You've sat in as many positions as you can think of and even sprawled out on a bed made out of your clothes in the aisle for a while, to keep your blood from pooling. In your seat again, alert, not about to miss anything, Shepherd, with half a dozen pages to go, stops reading. He just talks—the "five years too old to lie to myself and call it honor," the Dutch sailors looking at the "fresh, green breast of the new world," the smashing up of creatures, the capacity for wonder, the blue lawn, the rolling republic. He knows the sentences. He sort of becomes the sentences. They are—he is—great. 🌟