

Scene Partners

By John J. Caswell, Jr.

Directed by Rachel Chavkin

Vineyard Theatre

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Reviewed by Benjamin Gillespie

Scene Partners, written by playwright John J. Caswell, Jr. (author of the critically acclaimed play *Wet Brain*), is a non-linear exploration of memory and trauma that riffs on both the hopes and fears of its aging protagonist, Meryl Kowalski. Developed during the COVID-19 pandemic (while Caswell was in residence at the Vineyard Theatre), and directed by Rachel Chavkin, the play centers on the journey of 75-year-old Meryl, who attempts to become a Hollywood movie star as a septuagenarian—an unlikely feat considering the movie industry’s notoriously ageist reputation, especially toward older actresses. Over the course of the play, Meryl travels from Milwaukee to Los Angeles, finds an agent, and ends up in the starring role of a movie about her own life. Embodied by a (then) 75-year-old Dianne Wiest, actress and character are the same age, significant for a play that, in many ways, is about the resilience of aging. Wiest brought a wisdom and strength to the role that helped to center a purposefully fragmented, though often perplexing, production which celebrated the possibility of an artistic third act for its determined heroine.

Meryl’s backstory is told piecemeal to set up the play’s present tense in 1985. Meryl was born around 1910 in Los Angeles. At a young age, her parents separated, and she lived with her insensitive mother who relocated them to Wisconsin, where her mother then remarried. As we come to find out, Meryl’s stepfather repeatedly raped her as a child, but neither her mother nor stepsister, Charlize (played as an adult by Johanna Day), acknowledged this pattern of sexual abuse. Around 1930, Meryl married another abuser named Stanley Kowalski (“I know what

you're thinking" Meryl says. "I have no idea who's responsible for feeding the details of my life to Mr. Williams for his little play! But *my* Stanley, he was so much worse, in every possible way"). Her ungrateful daughter, Flora (played by Kristen Sieh), is a drug addict dependent on her mother's support to survive. The play begins *just* after the death of her husband ("that motherfucker!" she exclaims), at which point Meryl has had enough and decides to head west to become a Hollywood film star. But this is only the backstory, with the action of the play taking place in the present tense of 1985, but also (at least partially) in Meryl's imagination.

The play presents the often painful, albeit revelatory, journey of a woman trying to process a lifetime of hardship in order to discover herself for the first time after spending three quarters of her life in abusive relationships. The fragmented reality of her mind (and consequently, the play) often leaves audiences with more questions than answers. But in a way, this is the point. The poetic, dream-like world of *Scene Partners* is contrasted by the harsh realism of Meryl's life; anchored by the strength and tenacity of its aging central character, played expertly by Wiest, Meryl is akin to the great female roles of Tennessee Williams (who, as mentioned above, is directly evoked in the play several times).

Deciding whether what's happening in front of us is "real" or not misses the point: the focus here is rather for audiences to see Meryl telling her *own* story in the way that *she* (finally) wants and gets to tell it. But memory is a funny thing, and Meryl's is as fragmented as it comes, not only blocking out experiences of trauma but also facing an unnamed neurological disorder that suggests she is losing cerebral control. "Is this like a memory play?" asks one of her acting classmates who Meryl recruits to act in her life story. "Do you want realism or should it be more like *whoa!?*" "All of the above" answers her director/acting teacher. "It's a work in progress"

Meryl replies. *Work in progress* is an apt description for the play and production as it often loses its footing in between worlds, sometimes taking on the air of a rehearsal.

But this does not detract too much from the beauty of Wiest's performance or the stylish and dynamic staging by Chavkin, supported by a superb design team. The fragmentation of the play was emphasized through the innovative scenic and video designs by Riccardo Hernández and David Bengali, respectively, who utilized shifting screens and projections to illustrate the fluidity of Meryl's memories. The use of large, moving screens not only bifurcated scenes but also served as a visual metaphor for Meryl's fragmented, layered remembrances. However, while visually striking, this design choice occasionally created navigational challenges for the actors: on the night I saw the performance, one moving screen ran into Wiest mid-scene, though the seasoned stage actress hardly flinched and kept going without missing a beat.

Scene Partners seems to be a memory play, but not a traditional one: the world is split between "real" (or perhaps more appropriately *live*) performance sequences along with pre-filmed screen performances. Sections of the play are created with projected films on the large screens that shift in and out of frame to represent different environments on Meryl's journey. In fact, the production opened with an enormous projection of Wiest's face on screen introducing herself, reassuring audiences, "This is *exactly* how it happened!" But we are never sure if the play is supposed to be perceived as being composed in the present tense, or if this is a more traditional memory play. "My life starts now!" she says. And perhaps it is through Meryl's newfound artistic license that we should understand it all. The facial projection of Meryl shifts to black as words populated the screen with character names, like a script being written in real time, which is then read in voiceover as changes and corrections happened "live" in front of us. A sudden crash brings the lights up on Weist as Meryl descending from the heavens in a white

chair before getting stuck in what seems like a chairlift (from where, no one knows) so that Wiest's body could only be seen from the waist down. Stuck halfway between a dream and reality, in hindsight, this signaled where we would remain for the entire play. We later find out this process of getting stuck is a recurring dream Meryl has that she is performing for the film, but perhaps also dreaming.

Half the fun of *Scene Partners* is putting together who is *really* there and who is only imagined by Meryl. In fact, the generic title of the play is a reference to metatheatrical roleplay, as we never fully understand when characters are just roles inside Meryl's head or if they are actually there. The audience's collective logic is often challenged when characters appear and disappear at pivotal moments in the production—is that *really* her sister in the interview scene or a figment of Meryl's imagination?—not dissimilar to Florian Zeller's award-winning play *The Father*.

One thing is sure: Meryl is hellbent on being a great actress, but the trauma of sexual and physical abuse from the men in her past haunts her throughout the play. Again, *Scene Partners* is highly metatheatrical, beginning with Meryl's first entrance, reminiscent of Winnie in Beckett's *Happy Days* (a role Wiest played at Theatre for a New Audience in 2017). This initial scene sets the tone for a production that constantly questions the boundaries between reality and fiction. The play-within-a-play and film-within-a-play structure allows for a complex narrative that keeps the audience questioning what is real and what is imagined throughout. Indeed, Caswell's directive in the script that “people and things should seem to suddenly materialize and vanish” adds to this sense of disorientation and surrealism.

Determined to tell her story on her own terms, Meryl faces ageism and skepticism on her journey to Hollywood from those around her. She is told by all (including her daughter and

would-be agent) that she will only play old women in stereotypical roles. “I have been acting all my life. It’s time to get paid for it!” she replies. “There’s a market for durability. I’ll play a queen! Those roles are mine!” After receiving a suggestion to improve on her acting from her agent, Meryl enrolls in acting classes where her teacher “discovers” her and decides to help her develop a series of monologues that will be the basis for her life story in a series of films, each representing a different decade in her life. “I’m a maximalist at heart!” she says, which could also be a mantra for the expressionistic approach to Caswell’s writing, which created mixed reactions from viewers.

Scene Partners is a compelling exploration of a woman’s struggle to reclaim her own narrative and identity against the backdrop of Hollywood’s unforgiving landscape—and society more broadly. A rich and multi-layered theatrical experience, the play is a significant contribution to contemporary theatre focusing on age and aging outside of the typical narratives of decline we see so often. While the production was, at times, a little wayward, Wiest’s portrayal of Meryl was both poignant and powerful, capturing the character’s complexity and depth, her humor and kindness, but also her confusion and sadness. Her interactions with other characters, including her abusive deceased husband Stanley (who keeps returning in Meryl’s nightmares) and her over-the-top acting teacher-cum-director, highlight the various challenges she faces with unwavering resolve.

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