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[« Back to article](#)

Entertainment » Theatre

The Parisian Woman

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EDGE Media Network Contributor
Monday Dec 11, 2017



Uma Thurman and Blair Brown

Stage lighting should be more flattering. Smack in the middle of Broadway's unforgiving spotlight, Uma Thurman is currently starring in the second play of her life. Her first, on which I interned, was an adaptation of "The Misanthrope" at Classic Stage Company in 1999. John Simon had a field day with that review, sparing only the late great Roger Rees his invective. Age nineteen, I was in love with Molière and in awe of Uma. I relished every night of the run, helping Uma with her quick changes, wishing for lines of my own.

The star's second turn is in a new play, Beau Willimon's "The Parisian Woman," a D.C. drama as thin as a flat-screen TV and a far cry from even a watered-down Molière. But like Botticelli's Venus, whom the star animated in her 1988 screen debut, Thurman steps out of *this* shell as from a bas-relief, mustering a performance of depth amidst the D.C. shallows.

The lights are harsh, literally and figuratively, pouring salt into the play's weaknesses -- dialogue as filled with clichés as an Eagles song, characters you'll soon forget. Toplights magnify the 47-year-old beauty's face like a giant makeup mirror, exaggerating the years in a way that underscored, for me, how far Thurman has come in the interval between her plays: From a pretty performance to one of stunning command. Chloe, a self-described lost lady and careerless wife with the "Macbeth" bug, is a strange, brave choice for the actress.

Branded as if the season's sexiest offering, between a title that barely fits the play (it's inspired by Henry Becque's 1888 "La Parisienne") and adverts featuring Uma à la femme fatale, its marketing set different expectations than what was served. The glamorous, recently refurbished Hudson theatre -- buckets of champagne the new popcorn of the front rows -- and a superchic apartment of a set, designed to the bourgie hilt, seem calculated to give audiences a yummy bite of pre-dinner theatre. In reality, "The Parisian Woman" has all the sensuality of a country club. It's American to the core.

Marriages, affairs and friendships of convenience, without any of the violence or menace of Willimon's Netflix hit, "House of Cards," make this Washington world just plain sad. Quippy dialogue and darts are ear-candy -- "rags to comfort," "by gravitas, you mean balls?" -- but even the actors seem to find the lines barely worth remembering, as a fair few flubs implied.

That notwithstanding, the cast is as polished as its midcentury furniture, with pretty-faced Josh Lucas and pretty-voiced Marton Csokas taking turns at claiming Chloe. Her husband Tom (Lucas) needs her for talk therapy. Her lover Peter (Csokas) begs for her bed. The tryst is open, a theme Willimon also explores in "House of Cards," and which American culture seems to be flirting with, from 2014's well-handled "5 to 7" to the ["New York Times Magazine."](#)

The First Lady is played by Blair Brown, whose virtuosity reminded me of the honor it is to see a Broadway play. As First Daughter Rebecca, Phillipa Soo captures youthful anguish in an unlikely yet believable love affair with Chloe. An ancient-Greek style liaison, experience exchanged for youth, their good-bye is the play's finest scene as Chloe shoos her into adulthood, breaking both their hearts with a realist's wisdom:

Rebecca: I'll never be able to forget you.

Chloe: Yes you will. Before you even know it. You won't forget me completely, but you'll forget what it feels like to love me. You'll know you did, but it'll seem far away. Like looking at an old photograph you can't remember taking.

Chloe continues, eliciting a twitter of recognition from the audience:

Love will come and go. Careers are fragile. They have to be nurtured. Once they've fallen apart, it's much more difficult to rebuild them. Don't make the mistake of putting love before work.

Directed by Pat MacKinnon, the play seemed forced into its 90-minute-no-intermission time slot, as if it didn't deserve to slow down and consume a little more of our evening to contemplate its flashes of insight. It would have benefited from some breathing room.

As for the vehicle's star, she showed us something from inside Uma Thurman. The once 28-year-old new mother and wife of Ethan Hawke, whose corsets I tied and who introduced me to my current employer via her Trish McEvoy-filled dressing room, has publicly lived a lot of life since those days. She is wearing it well.

"The Parisian Woman" runs through March 11 at the Hudson Theatre, 141 W 44th St. New York, NY 10036. For information or tickets, call 855-801-5876 or visit www.thehudsonbroadway.com

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