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REVIEW: THEATER | By Terry Teachout

Lost in the Stars

EIGHT YEARS AGO, Kenneth Lonergan was an artist of seemingly infinite promise, a writer with three plays and a movie under his belt, all of them memorable. Then Hollywood knocked him off the tracks, and of late his career has been looking more like a cautionary tale. "Margaret," Mr. Lonergan's second film, was shot in 2006 but is still stuck in postproduction—he was reportedly unable to complete a final cut. Meanwhile, the premiere of his fourth play, "The Starry Messenger," was announced twice and canceled twice in the past four seasons, first by San

THE STARRY MESSENGER
The New Group, Acorn Theatre, 410 W. 42nd St., (\$61.25), 212-279-4200, closes Dec. 12

FELA!
Eugene O'Neill Theatre, 230 W. 49th St. (\$55-\$122), 212-239-6200

Diego's Old Globe Theatre and then by the Off-Broadway New Group.

Now "The Starry Messenger" has opened Off Broadway, preceded by a string of alarming reports suggesting that Mr. Lonergan and his cast had a rocky time in rehearsal. No doubt they did, but you wouldn't know it from seeing the finished product. Like "You Can Count on Me," the 2000 film that first brought its author-director to the attention of a national audience, "The Starry Messenger" is an engrossing study of the toll that prolonged disappointment exacts on the human spirit, performed with consummate skill by an ensemble cast led by Matthew Broderick and staged with unassuming finesse by Mr. Lonergan himself.

Mr. Broderick plays Mark, a 46-year-old astronomy teacher who dreamed as a young man of "becoming a real astronomer—a practicing astronomer," then came to the reluctant conclusion that he wasn't good enough to make the cut. Trapped in the smothering dullness of family life and an unsatisfying job, he stumbles headlong into an affair with An-

gela (Catalina Sandino Moreno), a 28-year-old Puerto Rican nurse with a young child whose father refuses to marry her. Anne (J. Smith-Cameron), Mark's wife, knows nothing of the affair but is all too aware of the reasons for his unhappiness: "You decided that everybody you were working with was more talented than you. . . . You told me that. And I never forgot it. It was the most terrible thing I ever heard anybody say about themselves."

Mr. Lonergan frequently plays Mark's sorrow for wry laughter, but only to lighten the dramatic loaf. At bottom "The Starry Messenger" is a deeply serious play, one whose dialogue is at once natural-sounding and full of small yet telling surprises. "Do you still care about me at all?" Anne asks without warning in the middle of a seemingly aimless conversation with her husband, and her simple, unstressed words crack like a whip.

If the plot of "The Starry Messenger" appears overfamiliar at first glance, that's because the once-rich vein of domestic realism has been worked so hard by kitchen-sink dramatists of modest talent (David Lindsay-Abaire's "Rabbit Hole" comes immediately to mind) that it could easily be mistaken for empty. Is it really possible to write an interesting play about yet another frustrated family man of a certain age who seeks to plug the hole in his soul by having an affair with a younger woman? That's like asking whether it's possible to write yet another interesting symphony in the key of E minor. It says much about the nature of Mr. Lonergan's gifts that for all the seeming obviousness of the plot of "The Starry Messenger," you'll never be able to guess what happens next. He is a theatrical alchemist who transforms the commonplace by portraying it with quiet honesty and charging it with moral complexity.

Derek McLane has designed a wonderfully appropriate set that consists of four small playing areas arranged horizontally beneath a starlit cyclorama that evokes the New York planetarium where Mark works. The members of the cast all give plain-spoken performances through which Mr. Lonergan's words shine brightly.



Matthew Broderick and J. Smith-Cameron in Kenneth Lonergan's "The Starry Messenger."

Mr. Broderick's recent stage appearances have been uniformly disappointing, but this one marks a welcome return to form, while Ms. Moreno and Ms. Smith-Cameron (who is Mr. Lonergan's real-life wife) play their parts with perfect naturalness and grace.

At a time when most playwrights are opting to keep it short, "The Starry Messenger" runs for nearly three hours, and I suspect that some will shun it for that reason. Yet it doesn't feel long, partly because of its humor-flecked lightness of texture and partly because Mr. Lonergan's characters are so true to life. Instead of romanticizing them—or, worse yet, condescending to them—he treats them as human beings, flawed but not without virtue, seeking to make their way in a secularized world that no longer has much to offer in the way of certainty. The result is a masterly play in which the promise of "This Is Our Youth," "The Waverly Gallery" and "Lobby Hero" is

decisively redeemed. As much as I loved "You Can Count on Me," I rejoice that its maker has finally returned to the New York stage. May he never leave it, at least not for very long.

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One of the biggest Off-Broadway hits of 2008 has moved uptown. The designers of the Broadway transfer of "Fela!" have turned the staid interior of the Eugene O'Neill Theatre into a riotous facsimile of a corrugated-iron Nigerian dance hall that appears to have been jointly decorated by Romare Bearden and Paul Klee. The music played inside, a savory stew of big-band jazz, James Brown-style funk and African percussion known to its devotees as "Afrobeat," is an ideal backdrop for the flat-footed, hip-swiveling dancing of the hottest chorus in town. All that's missing from this bio-musical about the life of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, the Nigerian pop star and political activist, is a plot, and an act and a half goes by

before its absence becomes obtrusive. Up to that point, you'll be reveling in the sexy pageantry of Bill T. Jones's choreography and the charismatic performance of Sahr Ngaujah in the title role.

The music and dancing are so good that if "Fela!" had been a half-hour shorter, I wouldn't have been overly troubled by its shapelessness. Alas, it plays for 2½ hours, and by the time the festivities draw to a close, you'll feel as though you'd lingered too long at a Thanksgiving table piled high with goodies. Even so, "Fela!" is tremendous fun, and anyone with curious ears and an eye for first-class dancing won't want to miss it.

Warning: "Fela!" is loud. Bring earplugs—and use them.

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