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EYE ON THEATRE

Losers and Winners

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a family that perished in the concentration camps, from which only he and an unlikely sweetheart managed somehow to escape. The part permits a beloved character actor, Ed Asner, to sport a German accent and make feeble fun of the Jesus freaks. Even the



irony of the near-extirpated turning exterminator isn't made anything of.

Wright's delusional master touch is fusing the two apartments, the couple's and Sam's, making for simultaneous interweaving actions, a device

invented and brilliantly deployed by Alan Ayckbourn, but that contributes mostly confusion here. Even the clever set by Beowulf Boritt, placing the visuals into a horizontal oval cutout, and leaving the rest empty except for some stars--and making it all look like a picture postcard--serves no useful purpose.

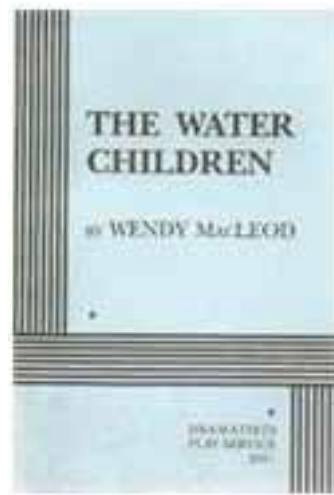
The actors, though wasted, are good: Michael Shannon as Sam, Kate Arrington as Sara, Paul Rudd as Steve, and Ed Asner as Ed Asner. A final cheap trick: Steve contracts an illogical itch all over his body, enabling Rudd to indulge in enough contorted scratching befitting a Saint Vitus dance, for additional unearned interest.

Succinctly put, "Grace" is a disgrace.

Grace on Broadway, Cort Theatre, 138 West 48th Street, 212-239-6200.

A far, far better play is Wendy McLeod's "The Water Children," good in 1998 and perhaps even better now, after such abominations as "Grace," "Detroit," and the rest.

Megan, a 36-year-old accomplished actress, now has a real problem: too old for some parts and too young for others, she falls into the cracks. Her agent finds her a lucrative TV commercial. But Megan, who had an abortion when she was 16 and is a confirmed pro-choicer, must in this ad



for a pro-life organization impersonate a woman who bitterly rues an abortion.

Being a good actress, she tests for it compellingly, but only at the cost of much soul-searching, tormenting doubt, and self-laceration. As she debates doing the ad, she sustains a wide spectrum of colorful but contradictory advice, as well as haunting memories. Most amusing opposition comes from her lesbian (though not with Megan) roommate, Liz, a wonderfully witty champion of abortion. Most significant support comes from her principal employer, Randall, who, though obviously an ant-abortionist, is nevertheless a

sympathetically empathetic character, and as it turns out in love with Megan and she, surprisingly, going to bed with him.

The action moves expertly between past and present, and even hypothetical future in the person of Chance, the boy who would now be 20, had Megan not aborted him. In making him an almost major character, McLeod also moves seamlessly between fantasy and reality, as between New York and Japan, where abortion is, though regretfully, tolerated and protected. There unwanted fetuses are not discarded, but granted quasi-religious respect as *mikuzo*, i.e., water children, in temples where they can be expiated and even brought to life.

We have here a marvelously motley cast of characters from homosexual hairdresser to talking cat, from Catholic mother nevertheless tolerating a daughter's abortion to a hotheaded, gun-toting antiabortionist, and various sympathetically conceived others. Except for Megan and Randall, all are multiple roles, savily doubled by an ensemble niftily directed by J. Paul Nicholas.

But beware: all this is in a tiny

space at Theatre 54 @ Shetler Studios, 244 West 54th Street, 12th Floor, New York, NY 10019, 212-246-6655, mounted by a new company, Goodly Rotten Apples Productions, headed by Mary McGloin, who is a good but not great Megan. The others, especially Carson Lee (Randall) and Jennifer Terrell (Liz), excel. Even though the projected run ends October 13, move heaven and earth to catch it.

Tickets are \$18 adults, \$15 students and seniors

<http://www.smarttix.com/show.aspx?showcode=WAT11> Ticketing Services by SmartTix, 212-868-4444.

John Simon has written for over 50 years on theatre, film, literature, music and fine arts for the Hudson Review, New Leader, New Criterion, National Review, New York Magazine, Opera News, Weekly Standard, Broadway.com and Bloomberg News. Mr. Simon holds a PhD from Harvard University in Comparative Literature and has taught at MIT, Harvard University, Bard College and Marymount Manhattan College.

To learn more, visit the JohnSimonUncensored.com

SHIFTING GEARS

Battle of the Asian Bantams

Nissan Juke and Hyundai Veloster

By ROGER WITHERSPOON

Let's say you're a car manufacturer looking to carve a niche from the crowded market for 20-somethings.

There are, of course, a host of well-made compact and sub-compact sedans and hatchbacks for under \$25,000. But you don't want to produce just another pretty metal face in a big motorized crowd. So you get a bit more selective and tell the folks with the crayons to draw something

that would appeal to young men on the go, guys who want something different and fast, but still economical and suited for urban areas.

Nissan came out the box with a powerful little compact SUV called the Juke, which the critics at *Car and Driver* thought most resembled an alligator emerging from the water. It wasn't long before Hyundai answered with something equally formidable, a compact SUV intended to evoke images of the fierce, prehistoric Velociraptor, and named, appropriately, Veloster.



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