

THE THEATRE

LOST IN SPACE

Kenneth Lonergan's Everyman.

BY JOHN LAHR



The slow loris is one of those animals which survive in the jungle by seeming to play dead. This torpid, wide-eyed creature came to mind as I watched the modest, buttoned-down forty-six-year-old Mark Williams (Matthew Broderick) try to teach astronomy to a group of pesky students at the old Hayden Planetarium in “The Starry Messenger,” written and directed by Kenneth Lonergan (at the Acorn). As he politely copes with every annoyance, every put-down, and every rejection from his students, Mark appears to be part pedagogue and part Shmoo. Genial passivity is his ozone: it’s a spiritual climate that signals a life as remote and silent as the stars that he points to in his presentation.

The play’s title invokes Galileo’s

1610 treatise of the same name, in which the astronomer announced his telescopic discoveries for the first time and unsettled the Roman Catholic Church’s assumptions about the order of things. In its own lacklustre, long-winded way—at nearly three hours, the play is proof of the peril of having a writer direct his own work—“The Starry Messenger” has similar ambitions: it is a demonstration of life’s caprice, which calls Catholic assumptions into question. Unlike Galileo, however, Mark is no pathfinder; there’s nothing daring about him. “I think he’s kind of boring, don’t you?” one of his students says, within earshot, in the opening scene. Mark, who is all too aware of his limitations, would be the first to agree. He has a droll line in

self-effacement. Watching “The Big Sleep” on TV, for instance, he says to his wife, Anne (J. Smith-Cameron), “Look, honey. It’s Humphrey Bogart. My other self.” Fair-minded to a fault, dutiful, full of wonder at the heavens but regret on earth, Mark expresses the resignation of the defeated. He set out to become a practicing astronomer; instead, he has had to settle for teaching. “I get to deliver the news. I’m the messenger,” he tells his class. His disappointment has communicated itself to his teen-age son, Adam. “I’m sorry your life hasn’t worked out the way you wanted it to, but you don’t have to take it out on me,” Adam shouts up from the basement. Mark is stalled, and lack of momentum is a problem for both him and the play.

The expert Broderick manages to make his character’s timidity both charming and galling. Mark is a son of a bitch disguised as a victim. He’s so split off from his anger that he is bewildered when it’s pointed out to him. To explain gravity to a particularly vacant student, he jumps off his desk, only to be called out by the student for his sarcasm. He immediately apologizes—he’s “a serial apologizer,” according to his wife—which is his way of not having to think about his actions. Likewise, with his family, he hides his aggressive indifference behind a show of consideration. When confronted by Anne about the family’s complicated arrangements for Christmas, he tunes her out with pliancy. “Anything is fine,” he says. “I just can’t talk about it right now. Whatever you said is fine.” She presses him for a day and a time to talk. “Tomorrow,” he says. “Five o’clock.” “I don’t get home till six,” Anne says. “I’ll be proud to talk about Christmas at six-fifteen.” To make a choice would be to assert his desires, and Mark doesn’t know what he wants. Occasionally, during his exchanges with Anne, a rumble of fury breaks through. About the Christmas plans, he mutters, “You should have said no . . . in the first place.” “What did you say?” Anne asks, rounding on him. “Nothing,” Mark replies, retreating into his shell. “It’s fine. I take it back. I take it back.” Mark’s connection to Adam, who is present only as an offstage voice, is just as tenuous. In one

Starstruck lovers: Moreno and Broderick in “The Starry Messenger.”

well-written exchange, Mark calls down to Adam in the basement:

MARK: How are you?

ADAM: Fine.

(Pause)

MARK: Would you like to know how I am?

ADAM: How are you, Dad?

MARK: I'm fine.

ADAM: Glad to hear it.

MARK: Thank you for asking. . . . I'm glad we could have this chance to talk.

Isolation is Mark's issue. He is unmoored, floating through life, with no connection to anything but the vastness of the galaxies, which are a consoling metaphor for his sense of inconsequence. There's talk of his applying for a less well paid job on a bonafide astronomy project—to measure the universe. When Anne asks him why he wants it, Mark hedges at first. "I don't know that I do," he says, then admits, "Because it would mean I was part of something." Anne counters, "You're part of something now." Mark doesn't answer; his silence is profound.

Loneragan, of course, stage-manages a connection for the hapless teacher: a sweet-natured Puerto Rican training nurse, Angela Vasquez (the appealing Catalina Sandino Moreno), drops into his classroom to inquire about the possibility of her nine-year-old son's attending the planetarium lectures. As a character, Angela, who is a single mother in her late twenties, is, predictably, the shiny emotional opposite of Anne: spirited, playful, a caring soul, for whom Mark is an object of desire—a good listener and an attentive stand-in for her son's feckless father. Angela does all the heavy lifting in their relationship: first talking him into bed, then pursuing him to his classroom, where, like a linebacker, she tackles him passionately to the floor. Dramaturgically, this is crude, unlikely stuff; thematically, it brings Mark, an avowed atheist, into connection with a devout Catholic. But when Angela angles for Mark to marry her—"You can't have it both ways. Sometimes you gotta make up your mind," she tells him—he can't. "It's my life, partly, at least," he says. "I can't defend it. If you want to stop, let's stop. Only don't expect me to be the one to say it." The relationship comes to an abrupt halt when Angela suffers a real tragedy—which a priest tells her is

divine retribution for her sins with Mark.

Loneragan, who has two Oscar nominations to his credit—for the films "Gangs of New York" and "You Can Count on Me"—has written a screenplay, not a drama. To understand the aggression behind Mark's passivity, we would need to see how crazy it makes the other people in his life. Instead, Lonergan keeps the focus on Mark, and the expositional scenes just don't add up. He can't pull together his moral argument or clinch the emotional transformations he forces on his characters. Unable to find a compelling rhythm, "The Starry Messenger" just sort of ambles to its conclusion.

The cast, however, is uniformly excellent. I particularly enjoyed Kieran Culkin's Ian, an insolent student whose pointed midterm feedback Mark takes to heart. "There's a kindness and a sincerity to your personality," Ian says. "But, I have to say, it's not enough to hold my attention for the duration of a three-hour class." And a series of short scenes at the hospital between Angela and a gruff, clear-eyed patient, Norman Ketterly (the outstanding Merwin Goldsmith), ring vividly true. "You're not my type," Norman tells Angela. "I like a skinny, unpleasant, abusive woman who looks kind of furious all the time and yells at me, on a kind of quota system." When Angela suffers her loss, she seeks Ketterly's counsel about what the priest has told her. Lonergan lets Ketterly speak truth to despair. "Nobody knows anything," he tells Angela. "We're all just guessing."

"Life is more fantastic than imagination allows," Mark tells his class in his final lecture. This is, I guess, an attempt to justify the implausibility of Lonergan's plot. Miracles happen for Mark, and, by the last beat of the play, he both knows his desire and can act on it. It's a kind of Hollywood ending—and a recipe for more chaos after the curtain falls. ♦

BLOCK THAT METAPHOR!

From the Lawrence (Kans.) Journal-World.

"Obviously, it's been a very difficult two days for us," Nelson said. "We kind of saw the writing on the wall Friday night. It's just apples versus oranges, and it's not a level playing field by any means."