

‘Loose Ends’ Is Fascinating

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Kevin Kline in Michael Weller’s play—
“richly entertaining, always provocative”

Michael Weller’s “Loose Ends” has just opened at Circle in the Square and, on almost all counts, it’s fascinating. But first we must go back a step. There came a time in our lives, an indeterminate time but let’s say the early 1960’s, when all the rules just blew away, like seckel-pear blossoms in a rainstorm: rules about boys and girls sleeping together, rules about being polite to strangers, rules about marital infidelity, rules about pretending to love your mother, rules about aborting babies, rules about who runs the household and no

backtalk, rules about not poking fun at the rules. For awhile the whole glorious sad-funny freedom was exhilarating: it was wonderful not having to lie about anything, wonderful being able to lie a blue streak about everything. In a definitive play called “Moonchildren,” playwright Weller pinned down the utter hilarity of total disbelief in the good, the true, the prefabricated beautiful. He also let us hear, underneath the inventive mockery, a melancholy strain. It was almost as though we’d caught one of his youngsters alone for a minute, biting at a hangnail with surprising savagery. For hangnails persist, even when you have no hangups. Implicit in the ending of “Moonchildren” was the notion that somewhere, around the next corner after college, there was an apparently stupid life to be got through. And if you weren’t going to lead it as stupidly as the old rules had wanted you to, you would be faced with a possibly intolerable chore. You were going to have to decide every single move you made freshly, independently, and for 24 hours a day. The ready-made life of the Boy Scout oath was dead. You were going to have to live a life of infinite choice. Which is not so much the subject matter as the specific dimension of Mr. Weller’s engrossing new play. “Loose Ends,” which I commend to you here and now while reserving the right to quibble a bit later on, would scarcely provide material for a play if an earlier structured world, with its gift-wrapped guides to conduct, hadn’t been reduced to a shambles. What’s it about? A boy and a girl fall in love (romantically, on the sands of Bali). In time they marry and are even happy together (making due allowance for quite customary spats). In greater time they are driven apart by career problems (perhaps a shade of something new there, given feminine liberation, but keep in mind that “A Star Is Born” wasn’t born yesterday). What’s new? What’s worth intensive investigation? All of it, because the earth’s turned turtle. Mr. Weller picks up, in that very first scene, the tone of voice in which “Moonchildren” reveled. Yes, the scene is romantic, as the quick attraction between boy and girl is genuinely felt. Yet the skeptical eye of a generation that went to school so profitlessly a few years earlier is still sharply, playfully at work. Kevin Kline, wonderfully mercurial as the would-be teacher, isn’t in Bali for the moonlight, cruise-conducted. He’s there because he’s finished a two-year stint in the Peace Corps, where sanity did not especially reign. Mr. Kline is immensely funny (in his author’s god-help-us-all way) as he describes a health program he and a friend have efficiently devised, using the whole of their savings for the necessary medication. When the medicines never arrive, he corners a superior, only to be contemptuously informed that the supplies are not going to arrive. Of course he can save local lives, he is told. But is he prepared to support the people he saves for the next 10 years? A calculated obsolescence involving death is at work here, and the irony inside it — the preposterousness of being kept from doing too much good — is as cutting as Mr. Kline’s account of it is cool. Neither he nor the friends he visits at home now and again want to “lose their coolness.” As Mr. Kline and his light and lively auburn-haired companion, Roxanne Hart, return to the States, she comes to think marriage might prove practical enough. Though she’s mentioned it five times, she confides to an acquaintance, he always says yes and never does anything about it. Not too long after, Mr. Kline, rocking in resolute and self-contained rhythm on a garden swing, admits to his vastly successful, relentlessly jovial elder brother that they have, in fact, married. Asked by the now outraged brother why he hasn’t so much as mentioned the fact to their mother, Mr. Kline’s buried angers erupt for once. In a fiercely telling tirade, he makes it plain that “marriage” means only what he permits it to mean, not what it means to a mother who bleeds her husband dry in alimony and pours the loot into a meaningless boutique. Nor will he have any part of his brother’s opulent way of life. He wants neither money nor a career, only what he “can see and touch,” a woman, a house, a child. The lines are read incisively, with such intellectual intensity and wit that cliché is driven from them. Mr. Kline has fought his

way through every step that might bring him closer to convention, has had to define and redefine the commonplace words that might entrap him. He is, really, a closet idealist, but one who must justify to himself each gesture, each commitment he makes, each aspiration he acknowledges. There is heat in the process, because so much energy is spent; but humor is always scurrying to the rescue. The actor’s timing is so impeccable that he can arrive at one firmly outlined conclusion and then, after a single suspenseful beat, draw a deeply satisfying laugh by adding an equally firm “Primarily.” You know that the self-questioning is beginning all over again.

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While little rifts are beginning to scar the relationship, the play bubbles along — for the most part — on interim meetings with old chums. Jay O. Sanders, as a husband and father who has cunningly kept his detachment intact, and Celia Weston, pregnant with a third child she admits is a “mistake” (while cautioning the one in her arms that she doesn’t mean it) make a dandy couple to drop in on. Jodi Long, attractively cynical as an assistant to Mr. Kline in his minor-league filmmaking, fixes a knowing eye on the partners as they begin to indulge in rationalizations and bluntly refuses to play “middle man” in their personal lives. Your decision, your decision, echoes through the play’s every inch. Not every inch is necessary. The evening can easily take some pruning. I don’t think we really need to know that one acquaintance has gone to India and returned with a robed guru in tow, a guru whose vocabulary consists mainly of the word “Yes” and simultaneously upthrust palms. We remember the kookiness that the moonchildren embraced; there are already traces of it here in Miss Weston’s instant cure for depressions (she asks herself, “Well, how bad can it be if there’s still sex?”). Though Michael Lipton is fine rattling off an express-train monologue, it’s scarcely worth an entire scene to inform us that our girl’s employer is gay. The author’s most serious miscalculation, though, Continued on Page 11

Burt Andrews

Loose Ends

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comes with our return to the loving but liberated private lives of the two principals. Miss Hart has stumbled into a successful career as a photographer, in New York; Mr. Kline's work keeps him in Boston, a city he also happens to prefer. What's affection worth? The surrender of a job, of a congenial environment? It's got to be thought through, as honorably as possible and — if possible — without compromise. "Deals" are distasteful. Love can't be love if it limits either party's options. Thus far Mr. Weller has carried us through his precise reflection of what's going on around us with perception, restrained passion, a lighthearted decency — playing fair with both contenders.

Then, in the process of avoiding the commitments and the rather degrading bargaining of a "deal," the youngsters — no longer quite so young — arrive at a sort of trust-to-chance arrangement. Mr. Kline's been wanting to have a child; she, at 32 and enjoying her work, resists the notion. Mr. Kline offers to join her in New York, without stipulation; she offers, spontaneously, to do nothing to interfere with the conception of a child. The relationship survives the threat of separate cities, separate professions.

Under the new decorated-penthouse dispensation, Mr. Kline becomes — hilariously, for a time — a self-mocking carbon copy of the coast-to-coast filmmaker: white suit, cropped hair, tinted

glasses, missing plane tickets. While he is away, Miss Hart discovers she has become pregnant, and, after a most tentative soul-struggle, has an abortion without telling him anything at all. With this, and much to our shock, we find all sympathy for the girl abruptly washed away. For she's cheated by her own standards. An offer freely made has been furtively withdrawn; the very silence is a lie. In a relationship built on fairness, she hasn't played fair, and the self-betrayal hurts. Oddly, it hurts us: we don't like our own rejection of a girl we've liked so much.

I realize that Mr. Weller may not have miscalculated his effect. He may well have wished human nature — unchangeable, irredeemably flawed — to intrude upon the most candid, the most considerate, the most fair-minded of newly minted worlds. And the crisis does give Mr. Kline the opportunity to play two more striking scenes: one scathingly violent, one charmingly conciliatory if ultimately futile. Musing, in his final loneliness, on such concepts as "respect" and "trust," Mr. Kline murmurs, "Funny how it comes back to words like that." Perhaps Mr. Weller's own candor has compelled him to look uncertainty straight in the face again, to take us back to where the "Moonchildren" were before they managed to invent their own demanding code.

In any event, and allowing for our surprise at finding ourselves — in a play of this kind — ultimately aligned with one partner rather than another, "Loose Ends" is the richly entertaining, always provocative work of one of our finest new playwrights. The voice is original and director Alan Schneider has made certain that we can hear its nuances, one by one. ■