

CRITIC'S PICK

Fleabag	NYT Critic's Pick	Off Broadway, Comedy/Drama, Play, Solo Performance	1 hr. and 5 min.
Closing Date: April 14, 2019	Soho Playhouse, 15 Vandam St.	212-691-1555	

By **Ben Brantley**

March 7, 2019

Every one of Phoebe Waller-Bridge's facial features is intensely expressive, and that includes both eyebrows. But it's her mouth that holds center stage at the SoHo Playhouse, where her fabled — and genuinely fabulous — “Fleabag” opened on Thursday night.

That mouth has been incarnadined in the deepest red, so it seems to have an autonomous life that's at odds with the cool, pale skin that surrounds it. And it rarely stays the same shape during this one-woman play about sex, longing and what churns beneath them, directed with finely gauged precision by Vicky Jones.

Ms. Waller-Bridge's lips shrink to the size of a postage stamp to evoke a subway pickup her character calls Rodent Face (handsome only from the eyes up). They morph into a rapt rectangular gape to summon a guinea pig listening to rock music, and curve into an alarming, complicitous leer to tell us about eating “a very slutty pizza.”

Then there's that open, teeth-exposing, wonder-filled smile that poises sheer delight on the brink of a bottomless despair, two states of feeling that somehow both negate and enhance each other. The same ambivalence infuses the ever-surprising sentences that fall from her mouth like jewels and toads in a fairy tale.

The show begins with Fleabag being interviewed for a clerical job, and it establishes her contradictory approach to others, including the audience, equally ingratiating and antagonistic. The interviewer is a man, who it emerges has recently been accused of sexual harassment.

“That won't get you very far here anymore,” we hear his recorded voice saying to Fleabag, when she starts to remove her sweater, revealing she has only a bra on underneath.

Fleabag swears this flashing of flesh was inadvertent. Then again, pretty much everything she does is an act of self-sabotage, even when it's in the name of self-gratification. "I'm not obsessed with sex," she says. "I just can't stop thinking about it. The performance of it. The awkwardness of it. The drama of it."

She masturbates a lot, inspired by online images of everyone from Zac Efron to Barack Obama, "especially when I'm bored or angry or upset. Or happy." And she registers all possible flickers of desire in the eyes of the men she sees, on the streets, in the subway, in her cafe.

In most best-selling confessional memoirs, such hypersexuality would be traced to a primal woundedness — preferably caused by a single traumatic incident or abusive relationship — and (or) a misogynistic society. Ms. Waller-Bridge doesn't traffic in clear-cut causes and effects.

Yes, the script includes a late revelation about a life-wrenching act of betrayal. But Fleabag seems to have been behaving in much the same manner long before that act occurred. And yes, the show takes place against an internet-shaped landscape of vast and mutable carnality. (Listen to her listing the varied names of the porn sites she visits.)

But while Fleabag is very much a woman of her time and place, a self-described "bad feminist" who exploits and is exploited by what surrounds her in the urban here and now, she can't be entirely defined by them. Think of her as one of the great novelist Jean Rhys's lost, promiscuous heroines transplanted to the 21st century, but with a devouring sense of humor that goes far beyond irony.

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Soho Playhouse

15 Vandam St.

TriBeCa/SoHo

212-691-1555

sohoplayhouse.com

Category Off Broadway, Comedy/Drama, Play, Solo Performance

Runtime 1 hr. and 5 min.

Credits Written and performed by Phoebe Waller-Bridge; Directed by Vicky Jones

Cast Phoebe Waller-Bridge

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