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Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Emilie Krause

The Final Three

by Miryam Coppersmith

[Theatre Philadelphia](#) and thINKingDANCE continue our partnership, begun in 2018, bringing coverage and new perspectives to Philadelphia's vibrant theatre scene.

There's a table reserved at Quig's Pub for the three stars of Paper Doll Ensemble's *Marry, Marry, Quite Contrary*—Julie, Bridget, and Taylor. The audience sits in the bar, awaiting the live taping of *The Chosen*, our chance to watch Julie, Bridget, Taylor, and other unseen women battle it out for John's hand in marriage. I feel like a schlub in my t-shirt dress and leggings next to the three *Chosen* hopefuls in their floor-length gowns, casually holding saucer-sized glasses of white wine. Julie (Grayce Hoffman) rocks a bohemian spaghetti-strap, aqua velvet dress with Ke\$ha-esque rhinestones stuck onto her temples to highlight her big eyes. She thanks an audience member for complementing her flowing blonde-pink wig, which of course is "soo natch-urahl."

Taylor (Taiwo Sokan) is in an elegant, purple high-necked number, anxiously asking someone to check her lipstick. Then Bridget (Sara Vanasse Quagliata) floats by, stunning and innocent in a white, off-the-shoulder lace gown. That doesn't last for long. Merely a second after the three sit down at their table, Bridget's scream breaks the pre-show chatter. There's wine all over her dress and the three performers leave the bar in a flurry.

A producer directs us to take our seats in the adjoining studio, facing the inside of a "secret closet" in the *Chosen* house. Dresses line the glittery pink wall stage right and shoes fill the shelves stage left. Bridget bursts in the door, sobbing.

"Stupid, stupid. Fucking Jillian!" She heaves off her dress, sniffling and whimpering, to reveal a complicated set of tight nude Spanx, all wet. She grabs a hidden bottle of wine and downs some. Out comes the ukulele and the tearful rendition of [Dancing on My Own](#). Vanasse Quagliata's physical precision, sense of comic timing, and commitment to her character's despair are superb—I am a little sad

when the other two performers enter to break her reverie. Over the course of the play, each character gets her own solo moment onstage, providing necessary breath to the break-neck pace and allowing us to see each of the performers' admirable character work.

While the three characters have made an alliance ("JBT in the Final Three"), we can see from the moment they're onstage together that they're far from friends. Julie berates Bridget for eating almonds ("They're so fattening!"). Bridget and Taylor have a secret pact to cut out Julie ("TB, Tuberculosis!") and that's just the tip of the backstabbing iceberg....

We only get to see JBT, so we don't know whether Jillian really is a bitch or whether John is worth all the drama (though we can safely guess he isn't). Julie and Taylor don't seem to even want to marry John. For Taylor, the simple fact is that she was supposed to be married by 30. Super-smart and the only non-white woman in the cast, the pressure on Taylor is palpable. She takes the edge off by snorting lines of coffee ("the grounds have no calories") while no one is looking. Julie is intent on the fame, getting to be the next Female Chosen, or maybe scoring a sweet mascara deal. Either way, she's doing her homework, studying the secrets of the Kardashians when she is alone. And she's not afraid to get dirty ("cut a bitch, suck a dick") to win it all. It seems to be only Bridget, the honest virgin, who's in it for love and the chance to mother John's "football team of children."

This whore/virgin conflict between Julie and Bridget comes to a head at the end of the play with some fast and furious stage combat. The fight is impressively real in such a small theater; kudos to fight choreographer Lauren "Ren" Williams. Once the dust clears, the two remaining contestants take a big black permanent marker and X out their former competition.

The drama is ratcheted up to 11 for most of the show, so the climax feels like just another energy spike. I leave having been joyfully immersed in a fully realized world, but not having tasted that elusive Snickers-bar of catharsis. I wish, despite myself, to see John or Jillian, to be inside the action instead of locked in the closet. Or at least for something more to root for or follow; the twists and turns come so fast that I have a hard time keeping my eyes on the road.

Paper Doll Ensemble is a young company, founded in 2018, with just a handful of shows to their name. Given the company's strong commitment to devising full worlds, delving into deep character work, and serving up the bizarre and absurdist, I plan to tune in to what they come up with next.

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[Marry, Marry, Quite Contrary](#), Paper Doll Ensemble, Plays & Players Theatre, Jan 24-Feb 1.

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