

In the spring of 2009, I saw a powerful play entitled "Distracted." It made some news because Cynthia Nixon played in it but did not stay on for too long. I was touched by the struggles that some parents go through with their children and how some of these parents are willing to look at themselves and change for the child. Since you may not be able to see the play, I am enclosing two reviews that appeared during its run in Los Angeles in 2007 and New York in 2009. Mariola Stahlberg

Distracted: a Powerful New Play Takes on Our "Pill for Every Ill" Culture

by Arianna Huffington

"I have a little problem with the idea of somebody giving my son drugs to keep him nice and quiet. Maybe I don't think nice and quiet is such a good thing." So says the father in *Distracted*, a powerful new play about the difficulties of parenting a child diagnosed with ADD. The play, written by Lisa Loomer and starring Rita Wilson, is having its world premiere at L.A.'s Mark Taper Forum. It's a stinging indictment of our pill-for-every-ill culture, in which parents of hyperactive children find themselves being pressured — sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly — by doctors, teachers, and school administrators to medicate their kids. In the case of Jesse, the boy in the play, the pressure comes in the form of a threat that, unless something changes, he'll be put in a special ed class. At its best, art can change the way we see the world, enriching the national conversation by offering stories that touch people's hearts in a way that rhetorical arguments and op-ed pieces (and, yes, blogs) rarely can.

I got the same feeling when I recently saw *Distracted* with my 17-year-old daughter. "I don't know what to do," cries the father in the play during an argument about whether to give his son Ritalin. "I just want him to be... a happy kid."

What parent can't relate to that? I was particularly touched by the play because with both of my daughters, at different stages of their lives, I had a doctor and a teacher suggest I put them on medication. In both cases I decided against it — and my girls both made it through difficult periods un-medicated, stronger and more able to navigate life's ups and downs.

This is not to suggest that there aren't children who benefit from medication. Clearly, there are kids with chemical imbalances who are helped by prescription drugs.

Indeed, one of the best things about *Distracted* is the way it gives both sides of the ADD debate a full airing. In fact, two of the most memorable moments in the play come when a teacher, at her wits' end, says of a problem child, "My entire

class is learning disabled when he's there," and when one of the actors playing a pro-Ritalin doctor breaks character and says, "You think I would even remember my fucking lines if it weren't for Ritalin? Before Ritalin, I couldn't even get to my auditions on time!"

But the play also makes clear that, as a culture, we have gotten into the habit of treating childhood as a disease — and of turning to drugs as the default (and cost-conscious-HMO-friendly) solution. There can be no argument that we are in the midst of a legal-drugging epidemic: America now has over a million kids on antidepressants like Prozac, and more than seven million on Ritalin.

The madness of the pill-popping phenomenon is nicely summed up in this exchange from the play:

Doctor: People with untreated ADD are three times more likely to abuse drugs.
 Mama: And by "untreated" you mean —? Doctor: Un-medicated. Mama: So, if my son takes a drug, he's less likely to take...drugs?

And later, the Doctor has this to say about the potential side effects of Ritalin: "The most common are loss of appetite, delayed growth, and insomnia, but we can always add another drug like Clonidine to help the insomnia. Some children develop tics, but we can add a little Tenex to control that."

The play also effectively raises a mirror to the parents in the crowd, forcing us to question how much our Blackberry-and-cell-phone-driven, multi-tasking, media overloaded ways are impacting our kids. As Rita Wilson's character puts it at the end of the play: "What if the best thing I can give my son for Attention Deficit Disorder is my... attention?"

I left the theater grateful that this cultural crisis had been dramatically presented in such a moving and engaging way. In a show business world increasingly driven by fluff, it's wonderful to see a production designed to make people think. And to see an actress like Rita Wilson, who never leaves the stage during the play, throw herself and her gifts into such an important subject.

Hamlet told us, "The play is the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king." Distracted will catch the conscience of anyone who sees it. And in modern America, when enough people are galvanized, the kings — whether political or medical or directly watching over the FDA — take heed.

To drug or not to drug our kids, that is the question we need to be asking — ourselves, our political leaders, and our medical establishment.

Living in an A.D.D. World: Lisa Loomer Talks About “Distracted”

by Erik Piepenburg

In Lisa Loomer’s new play “Distracted,” Cynthia Nixon portrays the mother of a child who may or may not have attention deficit disorder. The play, which is running Off Broadway at the Laura Pels Theater in a production of the Roundabout Theater Company, begins as Mama tries to quietly meditate, only to be interrupted by the screeching voice of her demanding child.

(In his review, Ben Brantley writes that the play “feels like little more than a compilation of jokes and observations that have been made, ad nauseam, about this disorder during the last decade.”)

Ms. Loomer, who lives in Los Angeles, said she was inspired to write the play shortly after her own child first enrolled in school.

“What I was seeing,” she said, “was an increasing number of children being diagnosed with A.D.D., with bipolar disorder, with anxiety disorder, with depression.”

Motherhood, the medical establishment and parenting are familiar topics in the work of Ms. Loomer, whose previous plays include “The Waiting Room,” about three women of different centuries who meet in a modern-day doctor’s waiting room, and “Living Out,” about Anglo power moms and their Latina nannies in Los Angeles.

Ms. Loomer sat down before a preview of “Distracted” to talk about bringing the world of ADD to the stage. Following are excerpts from her comments:

A.D.D. in an A.D.D. World “I was reading in the news about the increasing use of medication for children. I wondered, were we better at diagnosing these things? What was causing the increase in diagnoses and the increase in the use of medication? Was it drug companies seeking to make a profit? Did we live in an increasingly difficult world? . . . What does the increasing use of Ritalin say about us as a society at a time when we feel like we’re falling behind the Chinese, falling behind the Indians. Are we struggling to keep up? Why are we consuming these stimulants? It’s a complex answer. Everyone in this play presents a point of view that I encountered in researching and writing this play.”

A Mom’s View “The play is basically the mother’s journey. She’s the one who does the changing in this play, not the child. She goes from someone who believes that if you ask the right questions, if you go to the right experts you can fix things. That position is eventually challenged in the play. This may not be something she can fix. It may not even be something that needs to be fixed. What she learns is to think less in terms of the problem child and be more present with the child, with who he is.”

Names "A.D.D. has been called a lot of different things. Probably in the 50s we called those kids juvenile delinquents or Dennis the Menace. They were called hyperactive. For a while they were called minimally brain damaged. A.D.D. is a pretty recent diagnosis."

Making a Diagnosis "A.D.D. is a fairly subjective diagnosis. There is no blood test for it. There is a checklist. What intrigues me is who is doing the checking? What are the influences on that point of view? This is an A.D.D. society, and I don't know whether this is a dysfunction or a difference. There are people in the play who know, and you'll hear from them. I want the audience to leave the theater thinking about that. . . I'm not a doctor. I'm not a psychiatrist. But I think that there is something in the last scene that people will leave the theater with. I don't want to give it away. Some people will understand what I'm intending. Some people may be frustrated by it. Some people might misinterpret it. But there is a point of view.