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NY Review: 'Federer Versus Murray'

Communicado Productions at 59E59 Theaters as part of Scotland Week



Reviewed by Robert Windeler

April 11, 2012



Photo by Communicado Theatre Company

Like a good short story, a well-crafted one-act play can offer a narrative as fully realized and as universally resonant as a full-length stage work. Gerda Stevenson's "Federer Versus Murray" is a case in point. This 55-minute, essentially two-character play—about a middle-aged working-class Scottish couple, at the moment marginally employed and dealing with the death of their son in the Afghanistan war in very different ways—speaks to all of us about

loss, denial, blame, and escape.

Husband Jimmy spends the bulk of his redundancy lionizing the tennis star Roger Federer, to the point of rooting for him against a Scottish opponent, Andy Murray, at Wimbledon. (Hence the play's metaphoric title.) Federer is exactly the same age as the couple's late son would have been. Jimmy also admires the athlete's calm, gentlemanly demeanor and the neutrality of his home country, Switzerland, which never goes to war. Though Jimmy can afford neither, he orders up an official Roger Federer cardigan and plans a trip to the Swiss Alps to pay homage to his hero. He also paints his face red and white, the colors of the Swiss flag, to watch the Federer-Murray finals match on TV.

Jimmy's wife, Flo, who paints her face true blue and white for Scotland to take in the championship contest, displays her depression in more-familiar ways. Slogging through lobster shifts as an on-call nurse's aide at a local hospital, she pays grudgingly dutiful attention to her grown daughter and her ailing mother and flirts with the idea of an extramarital affair with a former patient. She won't touch or be touched by Jimmy and loudly derides his obsession with Roger and his other, even messier, fixation with clipping and saving newspaper articles about the Afghanistan war. The couple's

George-and-Martha railing against one another (yes, Albee's influence is felt) in their dingy living room makes up most of the action.

Author Stevenson also directs and plays Flo. Such a hat trick usually fails, lacking an outside eye, but here it results in an uncommon unity of vision and a completely realized production. Arriving in New York via Glasgow and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, "Federer Versus Murray" feels like a full theatrical experience despite its modest length and residence on a very small stage. Dave Anderson is Stevenson's towering equal in the role of Jimmy, and both come across as real people who will linger in memory for a long time.

Designer Jessica Brettle has contributed a remarkably compact set that effectively transforms itself into the alps by means of a large bed sheet, and Simon Wilkinson's lighting offers appropriate mood swings. A third character appears onstage at times: a young nonspeaking saxophone player (Ben Bryden) in a Glengarry hat. He surely represents the dead son and possibly the father's lost youth (Jimmy's an amateur saxophonist). Bryden's renditions of traditional Scottish airs, on the dirge end of the spectrum, enhance and help extend the reach of the play's deceptively simple setup.

Presented by Communicado Productions as part of Scotland Week at 59E59 Theaters, 59 E. 59th St., NYC. April 10–22. Tue.–Thu., 7:30 p.m.; Fri., 8:30 p.m.; Sat., 2:30 and 8:30 p.m.; Sun., 3:30 and 7:30p.m. (212) 279-4200 or www.ticketcentral.com.



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Battle of the Ages: Federer Versus Murray

Tuesday, April 10th, 2012

by [Eleanor Foa Dienstag](#) on [Playing Around](#)

You would think that *Federer Versus Murray*, a Scottish play first performed at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe about the Swiss Federer and the Scottish Murray, would be a pro-Murray play about tennis. But you would be wrong. In fact, nothing is as it seems in this layered, complex one-act play that is not much about tennis (except as an opportunity for metaphor) but rather about personal, public and political battles and, according to the author, “the link between the personal and the political.”

The play is also about loss, grief, marriage, culture, class, and the struggle back – personally and politically — from lies and estrangement to honesty and intimacy. Quite a lot is packed into one hour.



A dark, two-person tragic-comedy (plus a ghostly sax player who becomes more and more real) about a working class Scottish couple, the two characters verbally go at each other in their effort to deal with the death of their son in Afghanistan. (Written and performed in Scots dialect, it's difficult to understand every word but the theater has thoughtfully provided an issue of the magazine, *Salmagundi*, which provides both the script and an interview with the author.)

The acting is flawless, with author Gerda Stevenson as Flo, an auxiliary nurse and angry, withholding wife, and Dave Anderson, as Jimmy, her out-of-work, tennis-loving husband. Flo cannot speak of what has happened and in her grief turns against her self-educated politically astute husband and towards a kind friend. Jimmy, who secretly plays the sax, as did their son, compulsively watches tennis and consumes newspaper coverage of the war, wanting to confront the emotional and political chasm that threatens to destroy their marriage. "Your son died for lies," he angrily bellows at Flo.

The play is being mounted in a tiny theater. It puts us, the audience, practically in the laps of this warring couple, which is both an uncomfortable and, ultimately, powerfully moving place to be. As Wimbledon is about to begin on the Telly, Jimmy waxes eloquent about Federer's grace, elegance and gentlemanliness, while Flo, a proud Scot, is reflexively pro-

Murray. In the fourth of five scenes (reflecting a five-set tennis match) as the final battle between Federer and Murray is about to be played, Jimmy paints his face with the Swiss flag and Flo with the Scottish flag. What ensues is both hilarious and harrowing. Between this and the final scene, in which the couple wind up on a mountain in Switzerland, the saxophone player, now dressed in army fatigues, walks the periphery of the stage playing a mournful funeral march. The spotlight illuminates both the soldier and the audience, an audience I've rarely seen so moved and stricken with grief as this one. It is a powerful moment in a play that proves, among other things, that you don't need three acts to create a powerful work of art.

Photos by Jessica Brettle

Federer Versus Murray

Written and directed by Gerda Stevenson

59E59 Theaters

April 4 – 22, 2012

Tags: [59 east 59th Street Theater](#), [Afghanistan](#), [Dave Anderson](#), [Edinburgh Festival Fringe](#), [Eleanor Foa Dienstag](#), [Federer Versus Murray](#), [Gerda Stevenson](#), [Jessica Brettle](#), [Salmagundi](#), [Scottish](#), [Swiss](#), [Switzerland](#), [Wimbledon](#)

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FOR THEATER EVERYWHERE

REVIEW

Federer Versus Murray

By [David Finkle](#) • Apr 11, 2012 • [New York City](#)

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Gerda Stevenson and Dave Anderson
in *Federer Versus Murray*

(Courtesy Comunicado Theatre Company)

In the commendably compact play [Federer Versus Murray](#), now at [59E59 Theaters](#), the real match is not between the titular tennis stars, but between Flo (Gerda Stevenson, who wrote and directed) and Jimmy (Dave Anderson), a married couple who have suffered a great loss. What that loss is surfaces slowly as the tension mounts during the play's 55 minutes, so it won't be revealed here. However, during the work's several scenes, Flo takes increasing exception to Jimmy's exclamations while he takes in the Federer-Murray contests he can't get enough of. She's also offended at his listening to the world news as well as clipping reports from the local newspaper on global occurrences, particularly the war in Afghanistan and Scotland's part in it.

Stevenson's major accomplishment is that she sees how a sorrowful event can affect two people who clearly care for each other so that the difference in their responses can drive them so dramatically apart. She also incisively depicts how the one wishing to move on estranges the one who believes going forward is heartless.

While her characters argue heatedly and sometimes even come to blows, Stevenson doesn't fail to see the occasional humorous aspects of their lives. Besides wanting Flo and him to travel to Federer's Switzerland and even climb the Matterhorn, Jimmy orders and receives a cardigan with his hero's "RF" logo on it. Amused as well as annoyed by it, Flo notes that "it's acrylic" -- a comment that doesn't go far towards clearing the air.

Even more entertaining (while also being symbolically significant) is a sequence where Jimmy and Flo, who favors homeboy Murray, prepare for a match by painting their faces. Jimmy daubs the Swiss flag on himself and Flo, the Scottish flag.

Although they intend the interlude to be a needed calm in their more combative routine, it isn't long before they're battling each other and looking like nothing more than warriors in Mel Gibson's *Braveheart*. The tussle is simultaneously funny and frightening, and Stevenson's point isn't lost that ancient national traits will eventually come to the fore, diminishing societal veneers.

Stevenson is highly effective, especially when portraying Flo's fatigue and frustration dealing with a demanding work schedule and a husband who refuses to sympathize with her moods and whom she refuses to let touch her. A big man with a face like a red sun, Anderson balances Jimmy's sometime obtuseness with his genuine love for his wife and conviction that the only route to renewed happiness for them is going forward.

[EDGE Boston](#)

Entertainment :: Theatre

Federer Versus Murray

by Ellen Wernecke
EDGE Contributor
Tuesday Apr 10, 2012

Gerda Stevenson and Dave Anderson in "Federer Versus Murray" (Source:Communicado Theater Company)

In any other context, the squabble referenced in the title of "**Federer Versus Murray**" would be just another minor domestic dispute: A husband (Dave Anderson) obsessed with Wimbledon takes flack from his wife (Gerda Stevenson, who also wrote the show) because he's cheering not for the local boy Murray but for the princely, distant Federer.

Or maybe it's because he's been on the couch more or less nonstop since being laid off, while she works the night shift and keeps the house clean. Or maybe it's about their absent son -- but it's definitely not about the tennis.

Stevenson's writing is punchy but not too clever; she doesn't let her characters score points they honestly wouldn't be able to.

What "Federer Versus Murray" captures exactly is the blow-up around this seemingly trivial disagreement and how it ripples through the couple's lives. While sometimes its extensions become a little surreal (say, the moment when the husband takes out face paint intending to paint his face for the match, even though he'll be watching from the couch), that their issues can't be fixed by one discussion or even a good all-out brawl is extremely precisely rendered.

Stevenson's writing is punchy but not too clever; she doesn't let her characters score points they honestly wouldn't be able to do. Clocking in at about an hour, "Federer Versus Murray" feels compressed at times, but the lives of the couple are fully developed with no unnatural loose ends.

"Federer Versus Murray" runs through April 22 at 59E59 Theatres, 59 East 59th Street. For info or tickets, call 212-691-5959 or visit 59e59.org.

Ellen Wernecke's work has appeared in Publishers Weekly and The Onion A.V. Club, and she comments on books regularly for WEBR's "Talk of the Town with Parker Sunshine." A Wisconsin native, she now lives in New York City.

[Reviews Off Broadway](#)

[Federer Versus Murray: An Emotional Match at 59E59](#)

The title of the new show at 59E59 Theaters, **Federer Versus Murray**, isn't truly indicative of the content. True, you will see a match of wills - complete with volleys, pot shots and the occasional smash, but this is an emotional match between Jimmy and Flo, a long married Scottish couple.

Dave Anderson plays Jimmy and Gerda Stevenson plays Flo, and both actors have a real feel for these middle aged characters. The play opens with Jimmy having recently been laid off, and deciding to watch Wimbledon before looking for a new job. Jimmy's decision upsets the marital dynamic, which has been carefully developed after the loss of their son in the Afghanistan war. Since their loss, and possibly before

that, Jimmy and Flo have lived a quiet life. They have studiously avoided certain topics that would cause conflict, but now Jimmy's constant presence at home forces some uncomfortable conversations. Ms. Stevenson, as Flo, manages to organically convey exasperation, annoyance, longing and love towards her husband - common in marriage. But she finds that the reality of Jimmy wears on her patience. She has settled into a household rhythm and Jimmy has upset it. Even more frustrating, her husband now wants to discuss the loss of their son.

Federer Versus Murray is a quick show, about an hour long, but packs quite an emotional punch into that time. There is a fair amount of biting wit - a sign of affection in Scotland, but sometimes harsh to American sensibilities. In other moments, quiet things, like the emotion Roger Federer brings out in Jimmy, are quite moving.

The Scottish brogue here is quite dense and sometimes difficult to understand. It is a choice of the playwright (Ms. Stevenson), as it is the language of the working class in Scotland. Jimmy and Flo are definitely working class, struggling to make ends meet. This adds a layer of complexity to the characters, but it is a tough choice for American ears.

Gerda Stevenson wrote and directed this show, and her mastery of the material shines through. The cast comes with the show from the Edinburgh Fringe Festival last year. It is a wonderful chance to see a show that presents a different viewpoint on the war, loss and bereavement.

Federer Versus Murray @ 59E59 Theater

Playwright: Gerda Stevenson

Director: Gerda Stevenson

Cast: Dave Anderson, Ben Bryden, Gerda Stevenson

Plays Through: April 22 ([website](#))

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SCOTIA NEWS - Saltire Society of New York

John Beatty's Review of

Federer vs. Murray by Gerda Stevenson, a play in one act and five scenes

Federer vs. Murray takes its name from two famous professional tennis players: a Swiss, Roger Federer and a Scot Andrew "Andy" Murray. The idea of competition as a metaphor for struggle is particularly potent as the play considers the conflict of emotions, of ideas, of interpretations of history and of philosophies. Starting at the level of a tennis match (and who roots for whom) through the complexities of family life up to the nature of wars, the play manages to weave these ideas together skillfully into a tapestry that shows the impact of events on individuals in their relationships with one another and their own personal lives. It is a multileveled play in which the levels interact while metaphorically representing one another. The battles between a husband and wife, a tennis match between two men from different countries, a war between two different countries are made parallel while also impacting on the two main characters in the play.

Very near the start of the play there is a joke based on a misunderstanding of a line in a song. The wife, Flo (Gerda Stevenson) misreads the line and her husband, James Stewart (Dave Anderson) points out the error. Mrs. Stewart's interpretation of line gives new and different meaning to the text. So it will be for the rest of play where differences in interpretation of events lead to conflict and emotional stress for the couple as each of them tries in their own way to make some sense out of a world that seems to be running amok and which makes communication between people increasingly more difficult.

The play is set in a sitting room in a small modest flat in the industrial central belt of Scotland. The set is well designed with walls that, at appropriate moments, become transparent. Later, in the final scene, the flat is transformed into an outdoor snow covered landscape.

The story deals with a couple, for whom there is an event in their past which is kept hidden from the audience, yet which motivates much of what happens in the play. As the play progresses the audience becomes more and more aware of how this event (and its interpretation) is impacting the relationship they have with one another.

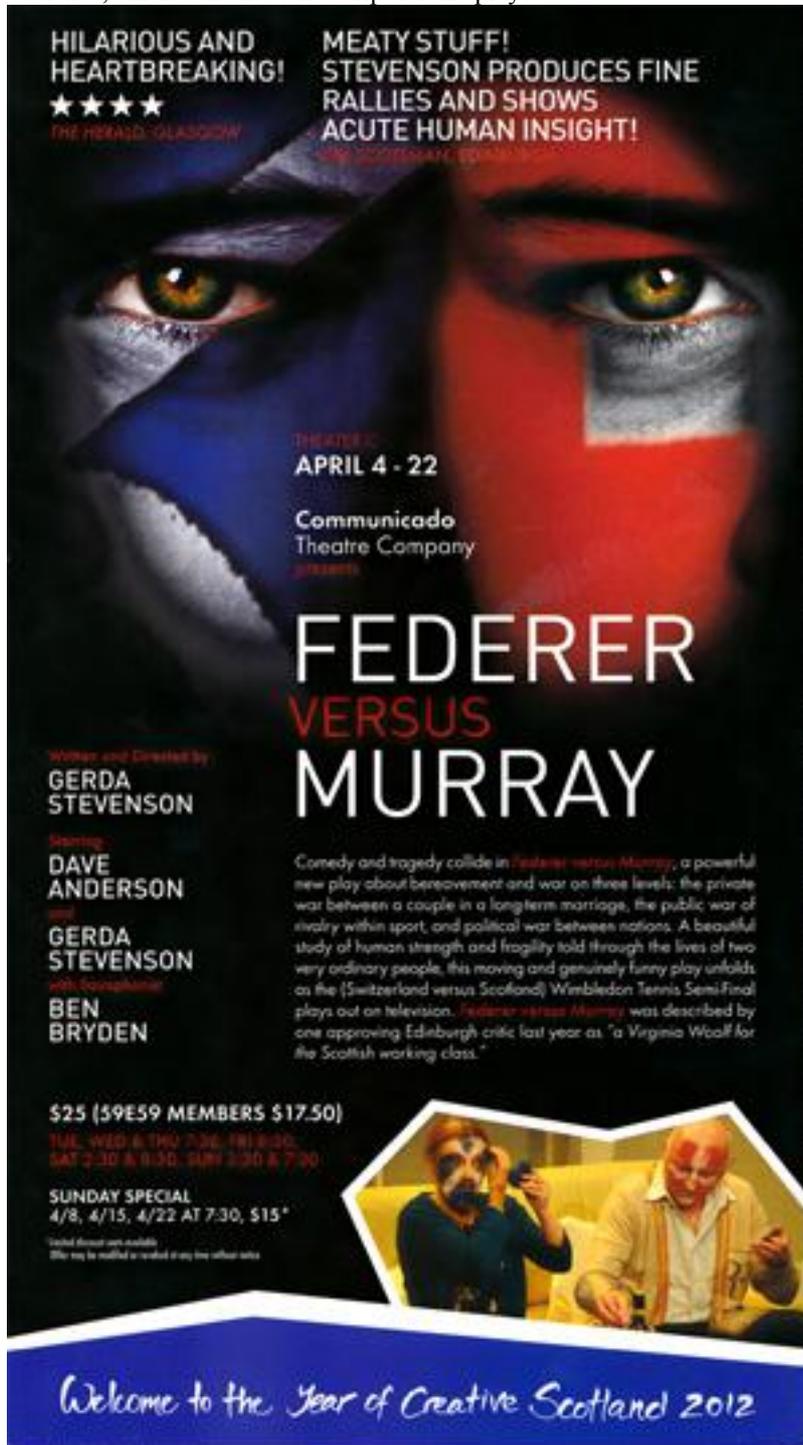
The play is powerful, thoughtful and insightful. It has moments of humor and genuine pathos. In its brief 55 minutes the performers run a gamut of emotions as each of the two characters tries to handle their own psychological traumas and to find ways of dealing them.

The play is performed without intermission and basically in a single setting - a living room. Between the changes of scene saxophonist Ben Bryden produces some remarkably effective music on his sax which resonates with aspects of the plot.

Author Gerda Stevenson plays the wife in the failing marriage. Dave Anderson tackles the role of James Stewart, the husband.

Federer vs. Murray was presented at 59E59 Theaters in a small intimate setting which seems particularly effective in keeping the audience involved with the two characters and focusing on the personal level rather than the more complex socio-political levels which emerge.

A fine touch was added when copies of Skidmore College's journal, Salmagundi, were handed out to the audience, which contained the script for the play.



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presents

**FEDERER
VERSUS
MURRAY**

Written and Directed by
GERDA STEVENSON

Starring
DAVE ANDERSON
and
GERDA STEVENSON
with saxophonist
BEN BRYDEN

Comedy and tragedy collide in *Federer versus Murray*, a powerful new play about bereavement and war on three levels: the private war between a couple in a long-term marriage, the public war of rivalry within sport, and political war between nations. A beautiful study of human strength and fragility told through the lives of two very ordinary people, this moving and genuinely funny play unfolds as the (Switzerland versus Scotland) Wimbledon Tennis Semi-Final plays out on television. *Federer versus Murray* was described by one approving Edinburgh critic last year as "a Virginia Woolf for the Scottish working class."

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