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‘Enter THE NIGHT’: Portland Experimental’s risk proves provocative, thoughtful: theater review

by Richard Wattenberg | For The Oregonian/OregonLive

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Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble thrives on challenges. Whether this group’s members have imaginatively re-envisioned classic texts (“R3” and “The Cherry Orchard”) or devised original pieces (“Song of the Dodo”), they have shown a willingness to take risks. And they’re at it again with their new production of Cuban-American playwright Maria Irene Fornes’ little known “Enter THE NIGHT.”

Fornes may have been a major contributor to the American avant-garde theater from the 1960s until she was slowed down by Alzheimer’s disease a little more than a decade ago, but this particular piece, which has only received two professional productions since premiering in 1993, has been criticized as being too personal for general consumption, even self-indulgent. But not to be deterred, PETE has taken it on, and the result is a fascinatingly provocative production that demonstrates how “Enter THE NIGHT” may speak to us all.

As the play’s three characters, Paula, Tressa, and Jack, gather in Tressa’s warehouse-like living space for a kind of reunion, each is haunted by anxieties resulting from a close encounter with death. Tressa, a nurse, is caring for a gravely ill patient who is preparing to die; Paula is dealing with a life-threatening heart disorder; and Jack’s lover, Joey, has just passed away from AIDS. During the course of the play’s action, which appears to take place within about 24 hours, the three characters seek solace in the love they feel for each other but also in popular art by means of which they can dramatize their faith in and hunger for reassuring love. Indulging in plays-within-the-play — even to the point of exploring gender role playing — the three try to fend off the darkness, the sickness and death that closes in on them.

While what we learn of the characters’ backstories may suggest they are anchored in a 1990s New York environment, the play also resonates with a different kind of sensibility — one that recalls the likes of Samuel Beckett. The world of the play lies ultimately somewhere between dream and reality.

Highlight: Guest director Alice Reagan and her cast of PETE regulars — Cristi Miles (Paula), Amber Whitehall (Tressa) and Jacob Coleman (Jack) — do an excellent job of negotiating the shifting rhythms of the text. The transitions between the playful and the poignant, the real and the dreamy, and the wildly energetic and the statuesquely still are very artfully orchestrated.

Most Valuable Performer: All three of the performers are equally central to the production. Miles gives us a strong-willed but caring Paula, Whitehall a loving but grounded Tressa, and Coleman a gently flamboyant but vulnerable Jack. The three actors work wonderfully well together as a finely harmonized ensemble and also splendidly with Jenny Ampersand's set. Most of the action takes place on a sparsely furnished (two benches, several lamps, and an old television set), large, multi-leveled, U-shaped platform, but the actors do occasionally move from the platform to the floor space around it, including the public restroom that becomes a bathroom in Tressa's apartment. Prancing and dancing around the stage during high energy moments or holding evocative poses (such as the Pietà formed by Whitehall's Tressa and Coleman's Jack toward the end of the play) when stillness is required, sprawling on the floor (most of which is covered in sand) or standing on, lying on or even crawling under the benches, the actors take full advantage of the acting space to convey the tone and spirit of the play.

Most memorable moments: There are a number of effective scenes in this production — among the most memorable are those associated with the plays-within-the-play. Miles as Paula and Whitehall as Tressa humorously perform Jack's absurd little play in which a city man and a country woman hilariously embody the conflict between urban and rural ways of life only to end up happily married. Adopting comically German accents and utilizing broadly mimetic gestures to reinforce the caricatures, they perform the first half of the "play" while standing on either end of a stage-right bench. At the end of this half of the play-within-the-play, Miles and Whitehall follow the lead of Coleman's Jack, who does a kind of cowboy hoe-down dance across stage. Miles and Whitehall then climb on the stage-left bench to finish their performance of Jack's play.

A later re-enactment of key scenes from the 1919 silent film classic "Broken Blossoms" also stands out. Here Coleman's Jack plays the Lillian Gish waiflike victim of a cruel father while Whitehall's Tressa portrays Huang the gentle Chinese man, who shows her loving kindness. Coleman subtly parodies the scene in which the young girl is beaten by her father. With sound designer Mark Valadez's musical plot nicely underscoring the action, we see the horror of the invisible father's arrival in Coleman's eyes, the violence of the beating as he shakes himself left and right and the heroine's pathetic death as Coleman leans back on the upright bench with eyes staring lifelessly upward.

Line of the Night: Coleman's Jack laments : "Oh my God ... How life slips through your fingers." And "How time passes ... How time passes"

Low Notes: Well, yes, "Enter THE NIGHT" is being performed in a new space, and acoustics here can be a bit of a challenge, but for the most part this difficulty is overcome.

Take-away: This is a thoughtful, sometimes amusing and sometimes rather moving production of Fornes' difficult play. It is, however, not for everyone. Those who prefer traditional theater fare may find this play rather opaque.