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Perchance to Dream

Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble's *Enter the Night* is beautiful, surreal and surprisingly funny.

BY REBECCA JACOBSON



SIDE BY SIDE: Amber Whitehall, Jacob Coleman and Cristi Miles.

IMAGE: Owen Carey

In *Enter the Night*, playwright Maria Irene Fornes takes on big issues. One character mourns the loss of his lover to AIDS. Another visits a doctor for her worsening heart palpitations. The third is a nurse who tends to the terminally ill—in fact, the play's first lines are medical notes about green phlegm and incontinence. That hardly sounds like a formula for an invigorating evening, but in the hands of Portland Experimental Theatre Ensemble, *Enter the Night* pulses with wonder, beauty and unexpected joy. Though the characters grapple with mortality, they're motivated as much by love as by fear, and the show swings easily between serious reflection and giddy, generous comedy.

Fornes, a prolific Cuban-born playwright known mostly in avant-garde circles, wrote *Enter the Night* in 1993, but it's only been produced a handful of times. Set in a New York City loft, the play covers about 24 hours, during which its three characters come and go, dance and kiss, laugh and wail, eat croissants and

drink red wine, and make toasts to ugly artists and re-enact scenes from silent movies. Fornes has little interest in exposition or backstory—she prefers goofy non sequiturs to biographical details, and we never even learn how these three friends know each other. Here’s what we do know: Tressa (Amber Whitehall), the nurse, lives in this loft. Paula (Cristi Miles) has moved from the city to a farm in Vermont, and her health is failing. Jack (Jacob Coleman) is an aspiring playwright who’s convinced he’s HIV-positive, negative test results be damned.

With a barely there plot and language that can fly into abstraction, it would be easy for *Enter the Night* to feel elusive or distant. Instead, New York City director Alice Reagan allows the show to move with little fuss from naturalism to surrealism. The surroundings help. The production takes place in a high-ceilinged warehouse in Southeast Portland, with a few wooden platforms—some covered in fine gray sand that squeaks as the actors tread across it—serving as the set. It’s spare but dreamlike, as if this could be a world apart, a place where the normal rules of the universe no longer apply. In one of the more surreal moments, Jack and Tressa re-enact a scene from D.W. Griffith’s 1919 silent film *Broken Blossoms*: He dons a tattered blue dress to play the unloved waif, while she portrays the kind Chinese man who adores her. Reagan adds richness by projecting scenes from the original film (not something Fornes’ text demands). In another smart move, she’s slashed the references to Frank Capra’s *Lost Horizon*, which helps slim down the show to a focused, intermissionless 90 minutes.

Occasionally, things tip into comic delirium, as when Tressa and Paula perform Jack’s newest play. A silly exchange between a man from the city and a woman from the country, it’s ostensibly about the conflict between urban and rural. But it gets great comic velocity from the exaggerated German accents—“udder” and “other” become indistinguishable—and the stylized physicality, with Whitehall’s slo-mo head tilts growing funnier with each repetition.

The scant storyline means the stakes must come from the performances, which is exactly what happens here. The three actors, all founding members of the company, bring palpable urgency to the material—you can’t fake this sort of commitment. I’ve criticized Whitehall’s babyish voice before, but here she dips into a deeper register and accesses fuller emotional resonance. Coleman brings both manic flamboyance and vulnerability to his role, sometimes galloping about the stage and sometimes crumpling into a dejected heap. Miles, meanwhile, plays Paula with courage and sorrow. Though it’s not quite a love triangle among this trio, it is an intricate, intimate web of adoration and need. By the end of the night, we feel tangled up in it, too.