

Play Critique Two

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On Wednesday, 10/15/2011, I made the harrowing half hour journey to downtown Dallas and Deep Elm, to view Undermain Theatre's production of Ages of the Moon by playwright Sam Shepard. I am happy to say I returned with not only all my hubcaps, but an experience I shall not soon forget. I was impressed with director Katherine Owens, intuitive ability to interpret this dark comedy. Elaborating on the theatrical elements of this production with impressions of the directing and acting is the cause to which I now set forth.

I felt profoundly touched by the production. This was one of those rare moments when the words of the playwright, the skills of the actor, and the signature of the director complimented one another to the end of wiping out all other reality. I have only one word for this production, bravo. Although I attended opening night, the performance flowed effortlessly. I felt the characters declining years as they bemoaned them as I have felt my own. Their plight was relative. Their regrets mattered. Humor, warm and crazy, became a weapon in a war they could not win. Years had passed them by, and only too late did the one friend realize he was losing what he loved most for an experience he did not even remember. He gave up what he wanted most for what he wanted in the moment. The friend he called to his side came through the tears of his own loss and as men will do, "sucked it up" to aid his buddy. Sitting on the porch the

two friends participated in the timeless ritual of man's attempt to understand the important things of life.

Most of the action took place on a deck in front of a screened in porch. The set was extremely well done. Two metal chairs of the tulip back variety sat on an old faded, braided rug center stage. Between the chairs sat a table made of a used wooden cable spool. Scattered about the porch leaned a menagerie of items ranging from a forgotten stuffed animal on a discarded sofa to fishing poles and an antique pedestal sink. The porch sported mismatched light fixtures, cast off licenses plates, deer antlers, rotten wood, and screen doors that needed painting, complete with a roof of used tin. Inside the porch an old metal kitchen table could be seen along with a refrigerator. Having grown up in the south at time of no air conditioning, I have spent much time in a screened in porch at my grandparent's farm. Therefore I can say with some accuracy, the set took me home. My only question was the back drop sky, which was blue, of course. Stylized figures appeared to float here and there; it was out of step with the rustic foreground.

Although the set was rich with realistic props, few were utilized. This was metaphoric to me. Perhaps we surround ourselves with things that in the end rust and decay and matter very little. From the ceiling over hanging the deck was a small ceiling fan. It was used by the players and at times it was operational and at other times not. It seemed to operate more off of raw emotion than electricity. When the scene was calm, it barely turned at all, but when the characters were fighting it spun like a propeller. At one point during a heated physical confrontation the character owning the place could hardly shout insults for the screeching of the

whirling dervish. The actor then suddenly stopped, turned, went inside the porch, came out with a shot gun and blew the fan off the ceiling. Thus his emotional Geiger counter, which was warning him, was gone. That's right, destroy the messenger. Another prop used effectively was the whiskey glasses. These glasses were shaken with anger, cradled with love, looked into with regret, and swirled wistfully. Even in the direst of circumstances, the glass must be held onto and perhaps, just maybe all would be well. These two props were perfectly used to tell the audience what the words of the actors did not. The props worked.

The costumes were simple. Ames, the friend in trouble, had the look of a man who slept in his clothes for several days and didn't care. He put on whatever was handy to cover his nakedness, red long johns, dress slacks, plaid vest, no socks and dress shoes. He was unshaven and unkempt. His worries were too great to be concerned with such mundane things. I was sold. Byron, the friend to the rescue, had that "good ole boy" look with a ball cap, boots, jeans, and a black cowboy shirt. His costume was tidy and pressed, down to the carefully folded white hanky in his pocket, as if he had someone back home who cared. Black and white, there you have it, what you see is what you get with Byron. The costumes were of a contemporary time period and worked well for these characters.

The makeup was realistic and understated. Because this play has only two characters and the action takes place in very close proximity to the audience, I could see clearly each character and makeup seemed non-existent. Even when the character, Byron, wiped his face with his white hanky I looked for color on it and saw none. All I can say about the makeup is it was very natural indeed, as were the characters.

As the play began the stage was lit with no actors. Lights went out, we heard a screen door close, light went up and two men occupied the metal chairs center stage, sitting perfectly still, staring off in to the woods. This made quite a dramatic statement. "For a moment here we are." The lighting in this piece is important because Byron arrives early in the day and stays through the eclipse of the moon. The back drop of blue sky surrounding the set subtly changes as the lights dim on it and twilight is experienced. This is significant as these friends are experiencing the twilight of their lives. Night falls through which much of the conflict is played out. We know night has fallen because light is all but gone from the back drop sky. Just enough sky is left to make one wistful not to lose it altogether, as if to do so mean an eternal darkness. Then there is the moment of the eclipse and a fading of light from everywhere except the friends, where it lingers and then finally dies. This gave a feeling of loss, as if something important was gone never to be recovered.

The first sound heard was country music, "Waltz Across Texas." This was a perfect blend with the rustic set. The audience listened to this song before any actor stepped foot on stage. Also during movement of the hours of the day there were outdoor sounds heard. The soft sound of bees, birds, wind, and night crickets helped to lock in the fact that I was outside, in the back woods watching two old friends come to terms with life. I truly believed.

The acting and directing was very moving because they enhanced the nature of the struggle between the two friends. A timeless retrospection on what might have been different if only... Each of us has our own internal regrets which these actors, skillful as surgeons, pulled

from our harboring breasts. They played off one another very well. The actor who played Ames had comedic timing and portrayed the pathetic, desperate nature of his character well. He was animated. I was especially taken with the performance of the actor playing Byron. His character made no unnecessary movements, no waste. He stared into oblivion, moved slowly and spoke slowly. His sedate nature made his companion appear revved up by comparison. To play this type of character convincingly is difficult. He was convincing. His performance of illness at the last moments of the play were extremely well done, down to his eyes which appeared to lose all focus. I was captivated and found myself holding my breath. "Not Bryon." I thought to myself and discovered I had whispered it aloud! My hat is off to this director, Katherine Owens, the action (or lack thereof) of this production was inspirational. I might have been a fly on the wall with any two real live people and their problems would not have been more real to me. I laughed with Byron and Ames, cried with them and for myself, which after all, was the point. My only question was why the back drop sky had stylized shapes apparently floating in it. It appeared out of place with the rustic set. When I first entered and sat down I was taken aback by this. But it troubled me no more once the actors took over. The directing of these two characters was rich with purpose and employed the talents of the actors to allow for their possible best.

Ages of the Moon is a dark comedy set in backwoods America with Baby Boomers as characters. It is light hearted, except when it is not, funny except when you're crying and in a way I cannot begin to articulate, deeply important. I believe the kind of importance depends on the audience. I highly recommend Undermain's production of Ages of the Moon. It is well worth the trip to Deep Elm.

