

Cultural Daily

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Carrie the Musical: Better Than Blood

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, October 14th, 2015

Carrie The Musical is an invigorating revival of a show that succeeds because of its newfound intimacy. Staged in an immersive environment by Brady Schwind – the fabulously rococo Los Angeles Theatre has been transformed into a high school stage within a stage – *Carrie* brings the audience into the action with a mix of bravado and theme-park ride.

Stephen King's well-known novel, on which the play is based, tells the story of a bullied teenage girl, entrapped by her mother's religious dogma of sin and salvation, whose telekinetic powers wreak vengeance on her tormenters. King's power in horror has always been that he allows the inside to come outside, and he will take his readers to places we hope can't be real, but are. Children die. Abuse is rampant. Blood can come from everywhere.

This *Carrie* begins with blood, menstrual blood, visible manifestation of the inside coming out and a foreboding image of what's to come. Emily Lopez, in a stellar performance as Carrie, has her first period in the high school gym shower, and the other girls, mean as mean girls can be, mock her. Carrie is meek and reserved, a mousey outsider who attracts torment. Her normally modest clothing and fundamentalist, Bible-induced attitudes, learned from her mother, only add fuel to the fire. Thanks to inventive staging, half of the audience is seated on risers that move throughout the show, at times backing away, at other times closing in to create a feeling of claustrophobia for Carrie, heightening the impact of her scenes.

The book has been modestly updated, in ways that sometimes work, sometimes don't. All of the characters have cell phones, which didn't exist in when the play premiered in 1988. It's a nice touch that Carrie begins to shift her self-image when she looks at an iPhone selfie. But other attempts at updating don't work: a throwaway line about gender fluidity falls flat.

The songs (music by Michael Gore, lyrics by Dean Pitchford, who collaborated on the classic 1984 film *Footloose*) function, often well, but none are memorable. They do not have the raw, nerve-touching aesthetic of today's best stage musicals, and I wish they did. The music is well-rehearsed and perfectly performed, and Cricket S. Myers' sound design is a model other LA theatres can learn from.

In contrast to the songs, the performances are memorable. The cast is energetic and committed. Kayla Parker as Sue Snell bravely frames the story; Valerie Rose Curiel, as Carrie's main school antagonist Chris, is a tightly wound "perfect" cheerleader with sublime unrepentance. Other notable cast members are Jon Robert Hall and Ian Littleworth, who bring subtlety and strength to their roles.

Strongest in the cast is Misty Cotton as Carrie's mother. With a mane of red hair and an Old Testament temperament, she preaches the gospel of Jesus and sin. Cotton's performance is the center of the *Carrie* wheel: she is strong, passionate, convicted of her own brand of justice, and the cause of Carrie's psychic trauma. The show would not work without her, and hers is a performance not to be missed. When Cotton, aghast at her daughter's emergent sexuality, says that she wishes she had not had her, you can imagine that the subtext is "unsex me here." Lady Macbeth has nothing on Carrie's mom.

The Shakespeare analogy goes deeper, too. Some theatre pieces offer nothing but surprise; that's what happens when you see a new play. But other theatre performs repetition compulsion. When we see *Macbeth* or *A Winter's Tale*, we know exactly what is going to happen, and many of us even know the lines. Still we buy our tickets. There is pleasure in seeing an old story told again.

So it is with *Carrie*. In case anyone didn't know the story with its over-determined set-pieces, audiences are greeted in the lobby by blood-splattered prom queens, and the magnificent Los Angeles Theatre is decked out in its vase subterranean ballrooms and vestibules with the detritus of high school gone wrong: creepy locker rooms, abandoned showers, a pig that has given its last.

The pleasure of an old story comes with the fusion of inevitability (Carrie must do what she does, and there will be blood) with surprise (how will the blood be spilled?).

In *Carrie the Musical*, spilled blood may be what gets patrons in the door, but it is the variegated performances, inventive staging and psychology that keep us there. As with any theme-park ride, be prepared to fasten your seatbelt.

Tickets on sale through November 15. Information here: <http://www.experiencecarrie.com/>

Top image: Emily Lopez, as Carrie (left) and Misty Cotton as Carrie's mother, in Carrie the Musical. Photo by Jason Niedle.

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