

# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## In This Theatre, Yesterday's Words Shape Our Tomorrow

Adam Leipzig · Wednesday, March 13th, 2013

Theatre-people!

They seem so self-involved, playing roles, doing characters! They say lines from plays, even when they're not on stage. Isn't it annoying?

At least that's what you may think when Laura enters an old house far up Beachwood Canyon. Laura, although classically trained in theatre, now finds herself doing studio movies. She seems insecure. She says a line from Shakespeare, to prove she knows it. She quotes Tennessee Williams. One day she might be Angelina Jolie. Today, though, she's B-list.

Laura has been offered the role of Lady Macbeth on Broadway opposite Liam Neeson. Maybe that will catapult her career. But can she do it? Does she have the talent, the voice, the stamina?

That's why she's here, in this old house, which is the estate of 100-year-old American theatre legend Abigail Booth. Yes, *that* Booth family. Laura hopes Abigail will coach her, and tell her honestly if she is capable.

So begins Donald Freed's thrilling and troubling play, *Tomorrow*, now at Los Angeles's Skylight Theatre. While some people decline with age, others reach the height of their powers—and that's the case with Donald Freed, now 81, whose plays I have produced and whom I have known for more than 30 years.



Abigail Booth, too, matches her power with her age. She is a grand act of imagination. Her character is so finely illuminated by the details of American theatre that you have a hard time believing she's a fictional creation. As played by Salome Jens, herself a treasure of the American theatre, Abigail is a ferocious idealist, a Prospero on an island of her own making. When Abigail overcomes her infirmities midway through the first act, the other actors and the audience together take notice. Frailty, thy name is not this woman.

Jenn Robbins assays the role of Laura with a depth that also surprises. When we first see her, we're not sure what to believe. How can this coddled actor, B-list, but coddled, ever have the inner power to achieve greatness? She has the vaulting ambition—but does she have the talent? In revealing her truest self, Robbins becomes worthy of Abigail's legacy.

As James Booth, Geoffrey Forward keeps the house and does Abigail's bidding. He holds back from the other characters and himself, using his task-list as an excuse. But there's a reason Forward is one of our country's foremost Shakespeare teachers, and he adeptly uses his skills in the play's final movement.

Meanwhile much goes on in the background. The year is 2000, and there are news reports of the Supreme Court's decision awarding George Bush the presidency. Jagged memories of Abigail's

failed efforts to start an American National Theatre—a ritual attempt to purge us from our political nightmares—litter her embittered dialogue. Nor can we forget the Booth family history of theatrical achievement and political assassination.

As the trio of actors work on perfecting Laura's *Lady Macbeth*, they enact a repetition compulsion with widening implications, and with increasing excitement. What at first seemed like actors quoting lines becomes vital dialogue—a more efficient and full form of speech. When you and I say “tomorrow,” it just means the day after today. But when these characters say that word, knowingly, with all its implications and layers, it means “tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow,” and every word thereafter.

✘ For this is a world of political ambition where power can be taken by murder or by court decision. If we hear old tales through the walls of this story, it's because the roles we play—in theatre and in life—are never wholly our own.

Damian Cruden, the artistic director of the York Theatre Royal, is one of the UK's rising-star directors; his production of *The Railway Children* garnered The Olivier Prize in 2011. Cruden directs *Tomorrow* with understated elegance and a focus on the characters' inner lives. Freed's plays are complex and sparingly written. It takes an excellent director like Cruden to draw out the implications so they resonate with actors and audience alike. Nor does this production ever lose sight of the fact that it takes place in a theatre, where, paradoxically, although the words come from playwrights, living and dead, they tell our story better than we can tell it ourselves.

*Tomorrow* plays at Los Angeles's Skylight Theatre through April 21, 2013. Information here: <http://www.katselastheatre.com/index.php/shows/tomorrow>.

*Images: Top, Salome Jens as Abigail Booth; bottom, Geoffrey Forward as Jeffrey Booth, left, and Jenn Robbins as Laura Keating.*

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