Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Permanent Image?

Sylvie · Wednesday, June 17th, 2015

The question mark in the headline is mine. Perhaps this title, minus the mark, refers to the human desire most of us have to *leave* "a permanent image" when we go. But using impermanent videotapes, as happens here, with which to do it? Or does this title address the *irony* of the very idea?

A Permanent Image, the play, currently in a West Coast premiere at Rogue Machine Theatre (even though this is not a new piece by the remarkable Samuel D. Hunter), deals with a subject that no one wants to talk about, let alone see discussed on stage. But Hunter has publicly stated that, as a playwright, he favors dealing with just that: subjects people don't want to talk about. And the results, at least so far, leave one speechless.

Almost.

Caution: If you're a true believer, this may not be the play for you. Otherwise, it's onward, with no holds barred. *A Permanent Image* comes loaded with plenty of surprises, the biggest of which is that it has a stoic spine that holds up a heavy subject and many laughs. One can rejoice that Rogue Founding Artistic Director John Perrin Flynn's unflinching staging of a piece on a hotly controversial topic gives three fine performers permission to dive in, pulling no punches.

It's Christmas. In a small Idaho town, a father's unexpected death has brought his two gown offspring back to the family home after a protracted absence. Son Bo (Ned Mochel) is a foreign correspondent who has been spending most of his time taking pictures of human disasters in what his Mom, Carol (Anne Gee Byrd), calls "awful countries." Daughter Ally (Tracie Lockwood), a Lesbian, who lives just three hours away, is entirely too busy with her trucking business, a wife and a two-year-old son to make the time to also visit Mom and Dad.

After all, this Mom, who asked her children to show up for their father's funeral, is as welcoming as a dentist chair, taking first prize for parental indifference. The first surprise for the kids is that Mom has painted everything in the house white. I do mean *everything*. Wait until you see the surprises that follow.

There would be far too many spoilers in a blow-by-blow account of what else to expect, but Hunter's style startles us with a couple of trademarks: his direct approach to dialogue and facts — no matter how shocking, uncomfortable or unconventional — and his facility for mining the organic humor in them. When you combine those elements with unpretentious writing, good things happen.

So what begins as a tame and skimpy family gathering in a barren living room, where the only color left belongs to a sad little artificial green Christmas tree, merriment is not the first thing that comes to mind. The juxtaposing of the touted meaning of Christmas with the bleakness of this family train wreck is entirely intentional, both as deliberate contrast and as cosmic comment. At this point, it doesn't take much alcohol (or maybe it does) to release unexpected revelations and strange turns of events.

A word here about Mark L. Taylor who plays Martin, the deceased husband and father, who was a hospital janitor and is seen only on tape, but who manages to make those moments count, ordinary and not, both as home-made tapes and simply as real.

As for Mom, she is very much alive and ornery as hell, but never boring. When she reveals a couple of major events to her children — one that has happened and one that she promises is about to happen — they all but fall apart at the seams.

Mochel and Lockwood are admirable as these befuddled grown children caught up in the steeplechase of trying to comprehend these utterly baffling parents. Not only do they need to try to figure them out (yet again) but, in the process, they also are forced to stare down the tunnels of their own lives not-always-so-well-lived.

Big cosmic questions get posited for which there are no easy answers and even fewer recommended courses of action. Did we mention that this play is funny? Authentically so, in so many ways. And so arresting when played by these accomplished actors — especially Byrd, whose impassive, formidable Mom takes on the stature of a comic termagant, without ever falling into the trap of making her less than totally believable. But then this astonishing performer could make a reading of the phone book prepossessing.

The issue of a life worth living, and by whose definition, is central to this piece. So is the perennial difficulty of human communication, which has obsessed writers for eons and seems especially complicated among people related by blood. That Hunter could turn such weighty matters into a play with levity and, depending on one's point of view, arrive at a relatively reasonable and benign conclusion, is some kind of *tour de force*. But then, this also is the writer who, in his play *The Whale,* succeeded in making us empathize with the plight of a not very pleasant 600lb. man.

l-r, Tracie Lockwood, Ned Mochel & Anne Gee Byrd in *A Permanent Image* at Rogue Machine.

Much credit goes to Flynn for staging this whole thing with the blunt force of honesty. Not only does it fill out the smaller of the two spaces at 5041 West Pico, but it seems to enlarge it with the sheer magnitude of the achievement.

"When I think about America, [working class people] are the people I think about," Hunter told an interviewer not very long ago. And that may be the secret of his success: that he lets you get to *know* and *feel* what it's like to be somebody else, someone you may pass on the street and never even notice. Someone you will never be.

That's huge.

Top image: l-r, Tracie Lockwood, Anne Gee Byrd, Ned Mochel in A Permanent Image *at Rogue Machine.*

Photos by John Perrin Flynn.

WHAT: ***A Permanent Image***

WHERE: Rogue Machine, 5041West Pico Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90019.

WHEN: Saturdays, 5pm; Sundays, 7pm; Mondays, 8pm. Ends July 20. No performances June 22 or July 4.

HOW: Tickets $30-$35, available at www.roguemachinetheatre.com or 855.585.5185.

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