Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Slightly Frazzled Edward Tulane

Sylvie · Wednesday, May 22nd, 2019

For some time now, the 24th Street Theatre has been specializing in plays for children designed to make them think and feel. Plays with human heft. It's an exquisite idea when it works. Not so much when it doesn't. Their current offering is *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane*, adapted by Dwayne Hartford, Artistic Director of Tempe, Arizona's Childsplay, from the young adult novel by Kate DiCamillo. It is a piece designed primarily for, well, young adults, although it is offered here to children as young as age four.

Edward Tulane is a cloth rabbit with a head made of porcelain china. He belongs to Abilene, a little girl who adores and pampers him to the point where Edward, who can think but cannot speak, feels extremely entitled. On a holiday ocean crossing, he has the misfortune of falling overboard, landing on the ocean floor, where he spends a great deal of miserable time.

Edward is rescued from this initial mishap when a storm tosses him into a fisherman's net. It turns out to be the second of many more disastrous twists of fate. As he's bounced from one to another, encountering a variety of people, good and bad, he begins to change. But after his head is deliberately smashed and then glued back together, poor Edward loses hope that his life will ever improve. He loves no one and doesn't care to do so, until a wise old doll assures him that love is the only thing that matters and promises that someone will come along and find and love him, if only he'll allow it. Which is very much what finally happens. So Edward gets a happy ending after all.

Carlos Larkin as the voice of Edward Tulane in the 24th Street Theatre's *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane.*

The concept is fairly convoluted and it never quite becomes compelling. Part of the problem with this 24th Street Theatre production is that the staging by Debbie Devine is barebones to the point of bleakness. The only furnishings are a tall, well-worn ladder that substitutes for some locales, and a heavy-duty luggage cart that stands in for everything else, from a railroad car to a bed.

The four actors in the cast, all of them dressed in black, each play many parts, and deliver some accomplished singing and acting. But most of the action is mimed and even Matthew G. Hill's video accompaniment is in dreary black-and-white and displayed on a screen too far upstage to connect well with its audience.

Rachel Weck in the 24th Street Theatre's *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane.*

There is an onstage pianist, Bradley Brough, who provides a tinkly accompaniment, while Carlos Larkin gives us the voice that Edward doesn't have. Jennifer Hasty is an accomplished solo singer whose occasional songs punctuate the action, and Rachel Weck does a tender job of impersonating various other characters who cross Edward's path. But the liveliest member of this cast is Brady Dalton Richards, whose youthful vigor and adept physicality in a number of roles, including an engaging puppy named Lucy, give this production the boost of energy it needs yet rarely gets.

All that black and grey creates a desultory effect, from which even the brightest imaginations would have trouble gleaning much inspiration. It is somewhat baffling when you consider past 24th Street Theatre productions, all of them staged by the very capable Devine, that have fulfiilled their mission in much livelier fashion.

Producer Jay McAdams told the audience at the performance I attended, that this rabbit is a narcissist. He is, of course, but while the word is on many tongues these days, it may be a concept not yet clearly formed in the many young minds in the audience, considering the possibility that some may be as young as four years old.

Brady Dalton Richards in the 24th Street Theatre's *The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane.*

Children do listen, look and relate. They are people in training. I'm all for giving them the experience of sentient theatre, and 24th Street has done that well and tackled complex emotions in very fine past productions such as *Walking the Tightrope* and *Man Covets Bird*. At some risk, I want to remind Devine and McAdams of something they said some four years ago and I quote: "If children are introduced to cutting edge theatre in childhood, then they will become lifetime theatregoers as adults."

Yes, they will. But cut-rate isn't cutting edge. And it's less than miraculous. It may be time to rethink the sharpness and redraw the parameters or move on to anything different that will restore thrill and excitement to the work. Theatre is very good at re-inventing itself, again and again, which blissfully means that it's never too late.

Top image: Edward Tulane & Brady Dalton Richards (on the ground), with Jennifer Hasty standing on the right, in 24th Street Theatre's The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane.

Photos by Cooper Bates

WHAT: ***The Miraculous Journey of Edward Tulane.*** Performed in English with Spanish supertitles.

WHERE: 24thStreet Theatre, 1117 West 24th St., Los Angeles, CA 90007.

WHEN: Saturdays, 7:30pm; Sundays, 3pm. Ends June 2.

HOW: Tickets $24, online www.24thstreet.org, by phone (213) 745-6516. Under 18: $10; Family Four Pack (2 adults & 2 children): $40. Seniors, students & teachers: $15; No. University Park

residents (with ID): $2.40. Appropriate for adults & kids 4 & up.

PARKING: Secure lot on the southwest corner of 24th & Hoover, $5.

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