Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

The Terrorist Next Door

Sylvie · Wednesday, July 22nd, 2015

Playwright Wendy Graf has taken on a sizzling subject in her one-woman play, *All-American Girl*, a contrapuntal title that gives you little idea of what the piece has in store.

It is a mouthful of a monologue, in terms of the complexity of the subject-mater and the demands made of each of the two actors alternating in the role of Katie (Annika Marks and Jeanne Syquia, both equally up to the task).

The piece attempts to answer this 64-million dollar question: how does a nice middle class, American girl from Watertown, MA, turn into a radicalized bomb-planting terrorist?

Graf has structured a strong non-linear portrait of this girl and woman whom we grow to like and wish to better understand, but the playwright ultimately delivers the predictable answer rather than the one we had hoped to find. Her all American girl falls in love with the wrong man. How many people, male or female, have faced perdition over *that* banal event? The object of Katie's fascination is a young Indian Muslim-Idealist-With-Grudges whom she meets in college. Fatally, she catches his disease.

No matter where or how searchingly the playwright — and we — look, the answer remains the same. Katie is a born rescuer, a sweet but unwise young woman, herself an idealist of another sort, who sees only straight lines between cause and effect.

When, as a teen-ager, she takes a job mentoring underprivileged children, she gets herself fired for encouraging the kids to tell their parents not to pay the rent on their subsidized apartments until everything that's broken in there is fixed. Nice impulse, wrong time and place. As her employer explains, she was hired to teach the children how to read, not how to run their parents' lives. It's a lesson Katie never learns.

Graf's portrait of this person is lively, often winningly seductive as child, teen-ager, college student and finally young wife and mother (quite a challenge for the actors who manage these transitions deftly). She gives us sketchy portraits of Katie's parents (nice people), a few other more incidental characters and a somewhat fuller one of Ygbal, the brooding young Indian intellectual whose intense personality Katie finds so irresistible.

Impulsive is another word for Katie, who marries Ygbal without telling her parents, because she's convinced they wouldn't understand. As the jobless, restless Ygbal's frustrations mount, so do his temper and religious fervor and Katie's commitment to his causes. It is a preordained path into the

abyss.

…in *All American Girl*

We appreciate the craft displayed by Graf and director Anita Khanzadian, and we follow this descent into hell with the kind of engagement we harbor for spectacular train wrecks, but ultimately the reasoning has no center. It meanders into nonsense. Do we kill as an antidote to killing? Does our Katie not see how the distorted rationalization only leads, pun intended, to dead ends?

Graf's effort doesn't take us much beyond psychology 101, but the attempt is an honest one and the skill of both performers holds and keeps our attention. The barebones production values are compensated by Joseph "Sloe" Slawinski's realistic sound and other effects that parallel the emotional build of the play, growing to a horrendous and utterly jolting finale.

If only we had discovered something less banal, something more startling, more revelatory on the journey leading up to this moment. If only.

Top Image: Jeanne Syquia in All American Girl. *Photo by Rick Friesen.*

WHAT: ***All American Girl***

WHERE: InterACT Theatre Company at The Lounge Theatre, 6201 Santa Monica Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90038.

WHEN: Thursday-Saturday, 8pm; Sunday 3pm. Ends August 30.

HOW: Tickets $30, at www.InterACTla.org or by phone at 818.765.8732.

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