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The Thin Place Is Thick with Ideas

David Sheward · Wednesday, January 1st, 2020

Hot new playwright Lucas Hnath takes a great risk by naming his latest play *The Thin Place*. Its plot and premise could be taken as gossamer light and critics could easily take cheap shots employing the skinny title as emblematic of the work itself. But this haunting ghost story—pardon the pun—contains an unsettling power, enhanced by the subtle work of director Les Waters and an expert cast.

Hnath has established himself as a daring and bold examiner of such heavy issues as religion (*The Christians*), corruption in sports (*Red Speedo*), the pros and cons of feminism (*A Doll's House, Part 2*), and the near-impossibility of accomplishing anything positive in American politics (*Hillary and Clinton*). In *The Thin Place*, he veers into a more esoteric and ephemeral realm—spiritualism. At least that's how this eerie and deceptively simple work starts. After establishing the basic, uncomplicated plot, Hnath goes into deeper, scarier country.



Randy Danson and Emily Cass McDonnell in *The Thin Place*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

In the intimate Peter Jay Sharp Theater at Playwrights Horizons, we meet Hilda (a brilliantly understated, focused Emily Cass McDonnell) who reveals her encounters with the “other side” and paranormal experiences in a long monologue. Hilda’s mother would attempt to develop her daughter’s extra sensory perception and Hilda longs to contact her after the older woman has passed away. Hilda later meets Linda (brassy and charismatic Randy Danson), a fake British medium who takes the younger woman under her wing—they are possibly in a sexual relationship, though this is never directly addressed. Linda gradually reveals her tricks of the trade in convincing gullible clients she is actually communicating with the dead.

The script then shifts into Wallace Shawn territory as Linda’s wealthy and influential friends Jerry (appropriately slimy Triney Sandoval) and Sylvia (slyly emotive Kelly McAndrew) enter and Linda’s manipulations take on darker tones. Are her methods a source of comfort for those in grief or a exploitation of raw emotions? We also find out Sylvia has given Linda huge sums of money and Jerry helped Linda with American citizenship papers in exchange for teaching her flashy means of persuasion to a shallow politician. As in Shawn’s *Aunt Dan and Lemon*, Hnath slowly leads us into a debate of huge implications from apparently small beginnings as the characters justify their dishonesty and greed. This can be read as an indictment of the current social and political climate.



Kelly McAndrew, Randy Danson, and Emily Cass McDonnell in *The Thin Place*.

Credit: Joan Marcus

The final section of the play takes us into a weirder realm where Linda's false powers are contrasted with Hilda's genuine affinity for and connection with the spirit world. Up until now, the house lights have remained on, but lighting designer Mark Benton suddenly plunges us into a spooky landscape where anything can happen. The power struggle between Hilda and Linda is finally resolved with shattering results. Waters' direction prevents the strange occurrences from overwhelming Hnath's complex observations on belief, spirit, and power as do the sneakily strong performances, particularly from McDonnell, whose deceptively gentle Hilda emerges as the one in control all along. This *Thin Place* is anything but thin.

Dec. 12—Jan. 26. Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 7:30pm, Sun 2pm & 7pm. Running time: 90 minutes with no intermission. \$59—\$99. (212) 279-4200. www.ticketcentral.com.

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