

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Uneven Shore-Line Off-Broadway

David Sheward · Wednesday, September 13th, 2017

British playwright Simon Stephens is best known on these shores for his Tony-winning adaptation of the novel *The Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*. But he has had many original works as well, including *Heisenberg* and *Bluebird*, both short and minimalist pieces, but loaded with intense emotions and truthful insight about human relationships. In *On the Shore of the Wide World*, his latest play to be imported to America, now at the Atlantic Theater Company, Stephens has gone in the opposite direction. The title is from a Keats poem but the play is less than poetic. While this dysfunctional family drama has some arresting moments, it drags on too long and becomes predictable and cliché-ridden.



Tedra Millan and Ben Rosenfield in *On the Shore of the Wide World*.

Credit: Ahron R. Foster

The play has an intriguing and unconventional tone in the beginning, though the theme of repressed feelings leading to damaged psyches is a familiar one. Stephens starts with an almost Pinter-esque atmosphere of unspoken menace as we meet Alex and Sarah, an amorous young couple looking for fun on a Saturday night in a suburb of Manchester. There's an undercurrent of anxiety in their libidinous byplay, echoed in scenes with Alex's parents, Peter and Alice, and his grandparents, Charlie and Ellen. Fissures of tension crop up as Christopher, Alex's jittery 15-year-old brother, falls hopelessly in love with Sarah, who in turn creepily flirts with the macho Peter. To add to the mix of suppressed passions, the seemingly charming, but outrageously alcoholic Charlie, assaults Ellen when she begins to show signs of independence. Simon has laid the groundwork for a scary look at an uncommunicative clan.

But then an unexpected tragedy rips the family apart and sends the play into a melodramatic tailspin. I won't reveal the surprise trauma which arrives near the end of Act One, but after it's uncorked, Stephens' quirky observations and plotlines turn into soap opera fodder. Peter and Alice drift apart and find varying degrees of solace with attractive new acquaintances. Charlie has a cancer scare which forces him to re-evaluate his inadequate performance as husband and father. Alex and Sarah move to London to escape the suffocation of their small town. (How many times have we seen these tropes in TV movies, novels, etc.?) In the final scenes, after several sequences tying up all the loose ends a bit too neatly, all are reconciled around a family dinner table.



CJ Wilson and Mary McCann in *On the Shore of the Wide World*.

Credit: Ahron R. Foster

Fortunately, Neil Pepe provides a strong staging and the cast delivers heartfelt performances, depicting the pain of buried longings. C.J. Wilson makes Peter's stone-faced silence speak volumes as does Ben Rosenfeld as the tortured Alex and Peter Maloney as the gruff Charlie. This veteran actor actually manages to make us sympathize with this hard-drinking narcissist which is no mean trick. Mary McCann has the somewhat less challenging assignment of pouring Alice's heart out since the character is more in touch with her sorrow. Similarly, Wesley Zurich exuberantly conveys Christopher's unbridled adolescent urges. Unfortunately, Tedra Millan and Blair Brown are unable to completely humanize the bizarre Sarah and the thinly-drawn Ellen. The actors and director deliver a professional product but it's nothing new or exciting.

Sept. 12—Oct. 8. Atlantic Theater Company at the Linda Gross Theater, 336 W. 20th St., NYC. Tue 7pm, Wed 2 and 8pm, Thu—Fri 8pm, Sat 2 and 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: two hours and 40 mins. including intermission. \$66.50—\$86.50. (866) 811-4111.

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