

Melancholia, Baby: "The Big Funk," at Augustana College through October 25

Written by Mike Schulz

Monday, 19 October 2009 06:00

At heart, the 1990 tragicomedy *The Big Funk* is less a theatrical production than a wrestling match, one between its playwright, John Patrick Shanley, and ... John Patrick Shanley.

Published not long after he won a screenwriting Oscar for *Moonstruck* - and a decade-plus before he received a Pulitzer Prize and Tony Award for

Doubt

- the piece finds the author grappling with his feelings about life, love, God, and the mysteries of the universe; it finds him confronting, and forcing

us

to confront, our collective insecurities, frustrations, and fears. Shanley's play tackles themes of stasis. It tackles despair. It tackles hope. And, in

The Big Funk

's

current presentation at Augustana College, it's the most feverishly exciting play I've seen at the school in

years

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This isn't meant to undermine any of the first-rate performances I've attended in recent seasons. But there's a special charge you get when everything - the writing, the directing, the acting, the tech - coalesces in a magical example of stage unity, and Augustana's *The Big Funk* seems to me that rare work that finds everyone on the exact same page. One of the play's characters is a circus tightrope-walker, and the metaphorical role, while hardly subtle, is also perfectly fitting for the show as a whole; you watch director Scott Irelan's daring and wildly theatrical outing and half-expect it to tumble, and it never does.

Shanley's play is not, however, for audiences who demand a traditional narrative structure, or who bristle at frequent and unapologetic breaks with convention. (*The Big Funk* is also not for those who want their shows to have an easily definable plot. The simplest answer to the question "What's it about?" is "About 100 minutes.") As the lights come up on Adam Parboosingh's visually arresting black-and-white checkerboard set, with rear-screen images of the cosmos projected behind it, a damaged young woman named Jill (Samantha Bestvina) enters, engages in a bit of philosophical discourse, and casts herself as the villain of the piece. She's soon followed by the aforementioned tightrope-walker, Fifi (Annie Tunnicliff), whose monologue reveals a cheerfulness that seems inseparable from madness. (She lets loose the sort of staccato, falsetto laugh that, if you met her in person, would have you quickly formulating an exit strategy.)

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Fifi's introduction, in turn, is followed by that of her sneering, pompous, knife-throwing husband, Omar (Neil Friberg), whose laugh is as comically wicked as his spouse's is comically panicked. Omar begins to soliloquize but is interrupted by the arrival of Austin (Jake Lange), an unemployed actor who debates with the knife-thrower over which of them will be perceived as the hero of Shanley's play, and

And without having said anything about the storyline, I may have already said too much, as *The Big Funk*

's principal joy comes from not knowing
what

will happen at any given moment. Suffice it to say that as these four characters - and an eventual fifth, in Martin O'Connor's tormented Gregory - interact with one another and with us, Shanley crafts fascinating, unsettling, and oftentimes hilarious portraits of both societal and individual meltdowns, and leaves no self-debasing (or self-aggrandizing) stone unturned.

To be sure, this material could've easily felt like a two-act therapy session with the audience cast as Shanley's analyst, as the author both directly and indirectly confronts his fears about marriage, parenthood, loneliness, failure, and the inherent futility of it all. What prevents *The Big Funk*

from being

The Big Whine

, though, are Shanley's spectacular incisiveness and superior talents for cutting, spiky dialogue and theatrical invention; Act II's uncomfortable dinner party, in particular, is a miracle of absurdist humor and insight. (It also features a miracle of a set piece, as Parboosingh's dining-room table is somehow able to stand diagonally on the raked set without the wine glasses sliding off.)

The author's gifts, though, are enhanced here by the inspiring imagination of director Irelan. Employing the rear-projection system in intensely smart and advantageous ways - never more so than in a risky, potentially offensive encounter between Jill, Gregory, and a jar of petroleum jelly - he provides the show with visual panache and compositional ingenuity, and along with lighting designer Rachel Krein and sound designer Rachel Stearns, complements Shanley's verbal wit with plenty of *technical* wit. (Interestingly, *The Big Funk* is October's second area production, after the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's

Around the World in 80 Days

, to use the

Law & Order "DUN-dun!!!"

music cue as a punchline. As I've said before: always funny.) The production is filled with

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masterfully directed sequences - Jill slowly backing away from an attack by her own subconscious, Austin bathing the young woman while swaying to "The Girl from Ipanema" - but Irelan's assurance is perhaps most keenly felt in his work with the actors, who appear to understand just what effects he and Shanley are going for.

If you've been following Friberg's performance progress in Black Hawk College and Genesis Guild shows over recent years, you'll likely thrill to his portrayal here, a dynamic, focused blend of megalomania, provocation, resignation, and abject terror. (He's especially fine and funny when Omar learns that Fifi - whom he didn't realize was pregnant - will be giving birth to twins.

Tomorrow

.) Tunnick invests her clown-costumed pixie with lovely hints of heartache, O'Connor's agitated intensity and reptilian charm make you wish he were around for more than the two scenes Shanley gives him, and Bestvina's Jill is beautifully understated, making a tentative clutch for happiness with delicate emotional shadings. (At Friday's performance, I had an ideal seat for the actress' best moment, which found Jill taking a long look at herself in a mirror; the slow, dawning acceptance witnessed in Bestvina's reflection was both heartbreaking and joyous.)

As for Lange, he more than fulfills the promise of his previous Augustana portrayals in *Blood Wedding*

and

The Learned Ladies

; he's absolutely outstanding. Addressing both his co-stars and his audience with a concentrated fervor that suggests how badly Austin needs, really

needs, to find meaning in what seems a meaningless universe, the performer is blessedly sensible and wonderfully empathetic, and his comic timing and offhanded ease could hardly be bettered. Lange is an exhilarating presence in an exhilarating show, and one that, on a strictly personal level, I found deeply satisfying; productions such as

The Big Funk

, after all,

are the reason that some of us went to Augustana to

become

theatre majors.

For tickets, call (309)794-7306.