

Atlantic Overtures: "Titanic Aftermath," at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre through May 20

Written by Thom White
Tuesday, 15 May 2012 06:00

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Director Paul Workman deserves high praise for making the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's *Titanic Aftermath*

at all watchable, particularly as the boat is sinking in the second act. Throughout Friday's performance, I kept thinking that playwright Michael Wehrli's script was a fantastic historical account, but also kept wondering, "Why is it a stage play?" With so much action *described*

, and so little played out visually, especially during the first act, this piece might as well be a radio drama, or the script for a *documentary*

on the Titanic. As a theatrical production, however, Wehrli's work is ... well, rather boring.

Workman makes a valiant effort, though, at adding some aesthetic interest, and in every scene, he has set his actors in photograph-worthy tableaux. For the first act, his carefully crafted placement is pretty much all there is to look at, as the audience is privy to the tortured memories of White Star line chairman J. Bruce Ismay (passionately played by Pat Flaherty), who recounts the investigative hearings following his ship's sinking. With Flaherty's Ismay on a chair on a raised platform at the center of the stage, several actors interrogate him, with the "action" moving back and forth from Flaherty to a representation of his younger self (Don Faust) at the back of the stage. By way of this staging, we get to see Ismay in the hearings and Ismay recalling those hearings. Unfortunately, with the conversations mostly about the design of the ship and the lack of safety features – plus Ismay's defense of his decision to board a lifeboat ahead of other passengers – there's not much Workman can *show* us, even though the act features many characters being questioned.

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That's not the case, however, in the second act, during which the details of individuals' experiences during the ship's sinking are told. Workman fills the stage with actors, shifting them here and there as they take on various characters and describe that fateful night during which so few made it to lifeboats. In these detailed accounts, from dozens of perspectives, of what transpired April 15, 1912, the overwhelming chaos is punctuated by the overwhelming number of cast members crowded onto the stage. And of particular note is the scene in which several men recount hanging from the ship and waiting for the right moment to plummet into the ocean. During their monologues, each actor physically dangles from the set's railing, rope, or other ship part and actually drops when they describe letting go, and while they don't fall far, the staging is still effective, with the performers' physical exertion registering in their voices.



Flaherty does an exceptional job of projecting the haunted memories of Ismay, a man under the weight of obvious guilt and emotional self-torture. And his Ismay is the most human of any character on stage, perhaps because the other figures are allowed only fleeting moments as Wehrli tries to give voice to so many passengers. Still, some do have notable moments. Patti Flaherty's giggly flirtation as a woman who needs to hold a man's hand to warm up her own is delightful. Heidi Pedersen shapes her Molly Brown with admirable moxie and self assurance. Pamela Crouch-Zayner offers an impressive, somewhat unexpected turn as a ghostly representative of the first-class passengers, portraying a noble, condescending woman of means; I'm used to seeing Crouch-Zayner in baser roles (such as the Hungarian in the District Theatre's 2011 *Chicago*), and was pleased to see her handle this wholly different characterization so well. Really, I have few complaints about any of the actors' portrayals – overall, the cast does a fantastic job of delivering the historical account with reverence, emotion, and clarity – and the minor issues I had with a few readings and deliveries aren't even worth noting.

The issue that I think is worth noting, though, is that Wehrli's play is perhaps *too* historical. While his work is remarkable as a detailed recollection of the finer points of that tragic night, *Titanic Aftermath*

seems, to me, to be too technical a telling for the theatre. I'm impressed with the script's factual points, of which there are so many, but wish there was more to see, and more characters with which to connect and draw me into the story.

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Titanic Aftermath runs at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre (4950 35th Avenue, Moline) through May 20, and tickets and information are available by calling (309)762-0330 or visiting Playcrafters.com