

**Bug** PICK*May 03, 2007*

By Les Spindle

Tracy Letts' provocative plays, including *Killer Joe* and *Man From Nebraska*, invariably get under one's skin. That holds especially true in the creepy yet mesmerizing *Bug*. This electrifying comic thriller, brilliantly directed by Scott Cummins, makes its eagerly awaited L.A. debut just before this month's release of William Friedkin's film adaptation.

A harrowing portrait of paranoia and degradation in rural America, coupled with a pitch-black love story, *Bug* mixes Sam Shepard, Alfred Hitchcock, and pulp potboilers, punctuated with ironic humor. Letts' shock-and-awe style places nightmarish metaphorical musings within a gritty naturalistic context. Set in modern-day Oklahoma, the story involves an emotionally beaten-down drug addict, Agnes (Amy Landecker), who hides out in a motel from her abusive ex-husband, Jerry (Andrew Hawkes), who was recently released from prison. Agnes' lesbian friend R.C. (Laura Niemi) brings a soft-spoken Gulf War veteran, Peter (Andrew Elvis Miller), to the room, and he forms a romantic bond with love-starved Agnes. All hell breaks loose when Peter claims to be the victim of horrendous government-conducted medical experiments, linked to a sudden invasion of insects in the room. Are the bizarre sci-fi and conspiracy scenarios described by the increasingly frantic Jerry real, or are they a form of dementia overtaking the emotionally fragile psyches of Jerry and Agnes? As we ponder that question, devastating scenes of emotional and physical violence create a viscerally enthralling experience that might prove too unsettling for the squeamish.

The smashing technical accomplishments — Ned Mochel's galvanizing fight choreography, Robert G. Smith's authentic-looking set, Lindsay Jones' unnerving sound effects, Leigh Allen's lighting, Gelareh Khalioun's costumes, and Julie Simpson's props — support Cummins' masterful handling of this show's daunting physical challenges. The lead performances are astonishing: Landecker's marvelously empathetic blend of wounded soul and hardened cynic; Miller's brilliant portrayal of escalating madness, expertly combining the role's intellectual and physical demands; and Hawkes' appropriately despicable loose cannon. Lending first-rate support are Niemi as the gutsy bar maid and Rob Nagle in a brief appearance as a doctor. Letts' stature as a major American playwright makes a quantum leap forward with this work. Ditto for the illustrious Lost Angels Theatre Company.

Presented by Lost Angels Theatre Company at the Coast Playhouse, 8325 Monica Blvd., West Hollywood. Thu.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 3 p.m. Apr. 27-Jun. 3. (866) 411-8111. www.buginla.com.