

Creepy, crawly and consuming

'Bug's bite is twisted, psychological

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U-Entertainment

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BUG ★★☆☆

Where: Coast Playhouse, 8325 Santa Monica Blvd., West Hollywood.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 3 p.m. Sunday; through June 3.

Tickets: \$34.95. (866) 811-4111. www.buginla.com.

In a nutshell: Remember to tip your psychologically infested waitress.

A former convict returns to the motel where his ex-wife has holed up, only to discover all variety of insect traps - seemingly by the dozens - protruding from crevices in the ceiling. "If I was a roach," Jerry mutters wryly, "I'd take the hint."

There are not a whole bunch of laughs in Tracy Letts' "Bug," a twisted and scary little love story about the boundaries between isolation and paranoia. Bravely performed and staged by director Scott Cummins, the L.A. premiere of "Bug" at the Coast Playhouse is more out-and-out gross than psychologically alarming.

This holds especially true toward "Bug's" finish, when the play's initial examination of a couple of lonely souls finding a connection devolves into something else. "Bug" and Sam Shepard's patriotism-run-amok play "The God of Hell" (seen at the Geffen Playhouse last season) would be fitting companion pieces. Both are looking into the workings of fear, of someone disappearing in the interests of patriotism and returning with a rewired - and damaged - brain.

Peter (played by Andrew Elvis Miller), the drifter who ends up sharing the aforementioned motel room with waitress Agnes (Amy Landecker), believes bugs are everywhere. Worse, he thinks the critters are under his very skin, in his blood, all-consuming. Trouble is, by the time he lets this belief manifest, Agnes doesn't know whether her best course of action is to lose the guy or buy into his thinking.

Before Peter's arrival, Agnes has spent her days drinking and partying her way into a stupor, often in the company of best friend R.C. (Laura Niemi). Nursing the wounds over the disappearance of her son years ago, Agnes now faces the return from prison of her violent ex, Jerry (Andrew Hawkes). Peter, who is also hiding, makes for a good soulmate in paranoia.

Landecker, who played R.C. in "Bug's" hit off-Broadway production, graduates beautifully to the role of Agnes. Her hardened face, haunted eyes and shuffling steps suggest a woman who - fear notwithstanding - wants the veneer to crack. When she finally lets another person inside, it's meant to be a moment of advancement, not desperation. You might say the character gets naked (both Landecker and Miller go completely bare) in more ways than one.

As Peter, Miller progresses from mysterious to dangerous in leaps rather than inches. Fair enough. Given that "Bug" ends up as a play about pursuit, Cummins and his actors can't much afford to take their time getting to it.

That said, the play's separate tones make the gross-out finale all the more jarring. The dark and moody first couple of scenes belong to Agnes, with the various people emerging almost directly from her drug-hazed dreams. That's a far cry from the over-the-top carnage that will engulf the proceedings at play's end.

Cummins and the Lost Angels Theatre Company scored a success with a 2005 production of Letts' play "Killer Joe." "Bug," which is due out as a movie in a couple of weeks, figures to be a tougher sell. These characters are, after all, rather unlovely people. And they're infested. Sometimes it's just more palatable to hang with people who don't need Raid.

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