



Ticket Holders

by Travis Michael Holder



Bug

Coast Playhouse

If art reflects the times and society in which it is created, the advent of gloriously literate but scary-as-hell sickfuck contemporary playwrights such as recent Pulitzer winner (for *Rabbit Hole*) David Lindsay-Abaire, Neil LaBute (whose *The Distance from Here* and *Fat Pig* are both being offered to El Lay theatergoers right now), and Tracy Letts should make all of us who care about the future after we're gone quake in the comfort of our Birkenstocks. Letts knocked our town on its ear last year when his horrific *Killer Joe* debuted at the teeny Gardner Stages, instantly selling out for weeks and eventually going on to win the Ovation Award for Best Production.

Letts' off-Broadway Obie-winning thriller *Bug* is the quintessentially delusional, deliciously paranoid, and cleverly clandestine anti-war play for the devolving twists and turns of the 21st century. Gratefully, it has suddenly and quite stealthily infested the Coast Playhouse presented by the Lost Angels, the same ballsy culprits responsible for bringing us *Killer Joe*.



Amy Landecker - Andrew Elvis Miller -
Laura Niemi

Bug is an almost John Waters-inspired grisly comic tale of two lonely people, the drug-addled Agnes (Amy Landecker) and nerdy Gulf War casualty Peter (Andrew Elvis Miller), whose furtive little Jerry Springer lives become strangely whole when they hook up one night in the drab motel room she's taken to hide, not very successfully, I might add, from her abusive ex (Andrew Hawks) just released from prison.

There's a bit of star-crossed Romeo and Juliet about the story of poor doomed Peter and Amy, but you can be sure their sweetly dysfunctional love affair does not provide an euphoria that lasts for long. After all, look what happened to Mr. and Mrs. R. Montague.

Although at first Agnes thinks her new bed partner—though a great... well... *you know*—is a total wacko, soon Peter's belief that he's being followed by government agents who've planted bugs inside his body while recuperating at a military hospital after his duty in Iraq, a scenario complete with rants about links to everyone from the Tuskegee Airmen to Timothy McVeigh, Agnes' growing love for him starts to win her over to his side.

Although Letts' *Bug* is as tense as Hitchcock and as bloody as a cult classic Andy Warhol movie directed by Paul Morrissey, the real genius here lies in how we, too, begin to be drawn into Peter's bizarre though oddly logical ideas, perhaps an especially easy task in a world where they tell us a lone gunman killed John F. Kennedy, Bush actually won two elections, and Iraq had secret WMDs.



Andrew Elvis Miller - Rob Nagle - Amy Landecker

So the question becomes, as we laugh guiltily at Letts' twisted humor and demands for visual carnage: Is Peter paranoid—or is this purdy close to how it could be behind the closed doors of the Oval Office and photo ops on the White House lawn?

There is little not to praise in this incredibly outrageous production, from Scott Cummins palpably tongue-in-bloody-cheek direction to Robert G. Smith's suitably dismal and claustrophobic cheesy motel room set to the superbly committed performances of Landecker, Miller and Hawkes, as well as exceptional support by Laura Niemi as Amy's fiercely protective lesbian friend and Rob Nagle, who in one brief but unforgettable scene provides one of the most shocking moments ever staged on any intimate 99-seat house.

When the lights come up at the end of *Bug*, one can't help look down to see if any stage blood hurdled itself to the back rows or if indeed Peter's little burrowing buddies were real enough to have made their way into the audience.

See, by the middle of Act Two, a creepy phenomenon takes over at the Coast Playhouse with this hauntingly eerie, creepy-crawly little show. From my spot in a back row, I could see almost everybody seated in front of me watching the tale unfold, scratching and itching and squirming in their seats at the suggestion that the bugs in *Bug* were laying their eggs in the most unfortunate places a nice warm human body could offer.

Yup, I got the point, though Letts is preaching to the already converted: his perhaps-mythical *Bug* is as potentially hazardous as the current administration is at infesting the rest of the world with its greedy hunger for more.