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Bug

(Coast Playhouse; 99 seats; \$34.95 top) A Lost Angels Theater Company presentation of a play in two acts by Tracy Letts. Directed by Scott Cummins.

Agnes White - Amy Landecker
Peter Evans - Andrew Elvis Miller
Jerry Goss - Andrew Hawkes
R.C. - Laura Niemi
Dr. Sweet - Rob Nagle

By **BOB VERINI**

The ~~roots of madness~~ may always remain a mystery, but the pathology of those who collude in madness -- those who are unaccountably persuaded to join up for a Charlie Manson spree or drink the Jonestown Kool-Aid -- is rendered more explicable thanks to Tracy Letts' "Bug." Depiction of a lost soul's inexorable journey to the edge of the abyss is well worth experiencing, even in this uneven L.A. premiere mounting at the Coast Playhouse.

Framed in a blue glow while leaning back amid billowing smoke, Agnes (Amy Landecker) has a look of perpetual pain that places her squarely among the walking wounded. Coked up and shuffling around a crummy Plains motel room, where she's holed up to avoid newly paroled ex-husband Jerry (Andrew Hawkes), Agnes is ready prey for anyone prepared to offer a kind word and nonjudgmental eye.

Enter drifter Peter (Andrew Elvis Miller), an equally lonely but refreshingly wry and simpatico sort with whom Agnes is moved to share her room, her bed and, most important, her secrets. As it happens, those secrets dovetail woefully neatly with the real source of Peter's interest: the nature of the bugs that he finds all around him and even in him, one or two at first and then in swarms.

Miller deftly and mostly believably charts Peter's progression from milquetoast to monomaniac. At first only occasional wincing and neck cricks hint at the storms swirling in his head, but distraction is gradually transformed into paranoia and unbridled physical obsession. One particular bug attack plays out more frighteningly than a junkie's withdrawal in "A Hatful of Rain."

Yet Miller craftily recognizes Peter's passive-aggressive nature. He tosses out hints -- and helmer Scott Cummins is an invaluable orchestrator here -- that allow Agnes to connect the dots from the bugs to the fragments of her life. She fervently embraces the "it could be true, therefore it must be true" logic that's the stock-in-trade of all conspiracy theorists, such that in the end Peter can claim clean hands in Agnes' descent and downfall. The free will of disciples, after all, is the perennial defense of cults confronted with their toll of human destruction.

Other actors have their moments but don't fully inhabit their roles. As Agnes' Lesbian gal pal R.C., Laura Niemi plays one angry note and sticks to it. Hawkes' Jerry is all buffed-up bluster, in which we see little that would have attracted Agnes back in the day and little danger now, while Rob Nagle needs more unforced authority in the uncertainly written role of Peter's physician.

Landecker was superb in the original Gotham production, in the role of R.C., where her hard jaw and pugnacious spirit were utterly right. Her Agnes convincingly lives life from the bottom of a used-up bong, but there's no residue of freshness and youth there for Peter to rekindle, even briefly. Landecker has stamped down the two characteristics, sexuality and maternity, that draw Peter to Agnes in the first place, so while her emoting is skillful, the leads' relationship feels as inauthentic as the actors' body waxes (and odd piercing) that distract when the characters should be at their most vulnerable and real.

Cummins appreciates effective stage pictures and naturalistic detail and gleefully shifts between bawdy humor and dead seriousness. But some of the transitions (Agnes' inviting Peter to bed, for instance) feel rushed, while other moments are overstaged: Agnes and Peter's rush to bar the door is too obviously choreographed while blurring a crucial bit of savagery involving a staple gun.

The problem of violence and combat in a confined theater space is an endlessly knotty one, and fight director Ned Mochel's answer -- make each moment lurid but get it over with quickly -- doesn't satisfy. Since Leigh Allen regularly substitutes moody effects for realistic lighting, doing so during the bloodier sequences might have assisted the sleight-of-hand. And Robert G. Smith's picture-perfect motel room is both too wide to sustain the hothouse illusion and insufficiently deep to keep characters, and play, at an appropriate remove.

Sets, Robert G. Smith; costumes, Gelareh Khalioun; lighting, Leigh Allen; sound design, Lindsay Jones; fight director, Ned Mochel; production stage manager, Jamie A. Tucker. Opened, reviewed April 27, 2007. Runs through June 3. Running time: 1 HOUR, 50 MIN.

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