

What the Butler Saw

Attendant to Matters Esthetica that Abound in the House of Culture

July 17, 2010

"Play Date," The Elephant Stages, by James Scarborough

Incisive and hilarious, Sam Wolfson's "Playing Dates," directed by Jennifer Chambers at The Elephant Stages for Green Beetle Productions, suggests a "Whatever Happened To" update to the characters in Charles Schultz's "Peanuts."

The production offers the romantic equivalent of a definition of democracy: "(It's) like a raft. It never sinks but, damn it, your feet are always in the water." It nailed both its demographic, Baby Boomers no longer invulnerable, and its theme, young love may soar but when it reaches middle age, a Slinky take the place of wings.

Kurt Boetcher's set said it all. In the first act's dewy spring of eternal love, a leafy, evergreen heart backdrop symbolized optimism and hope. Later it turns bright red (anger, embarrassment) and breaks in half, resembling warring Pac Man figures.

The story's structured with three intermissionless acts. "Boy Meets Girl," takes place on a kindergarten playground. Four-year-olds Stacey (Elizabeth Bond) and Sam (Rob Nagle), cement their burgeoning, clueless relationship with a contract. "Dr. Love" features a grown up Sam who, still smitten with and devastated by a long-departed Stacey, hosts a call-in radio program that discusses - What else? - the vagaries of love, thus confirming that those who can't do something bitch about it on talk radio. "Honeymoon Period" begins with the shared (and acrobatic) grooming ritual - *Gross!* - of a terminally married couple, Jeff (Brian Monahan) and Katie (Kristen Lee Kelly) and concludes with a failed attempt to resurrect their gravy years with an aborted threesome with Brooke (Bond), advice taken a little too literally via a phone call to Wendy's brother, Dr. Love.

With admirable deftness the actors reveal how a kid's expectations of love colors their adult experience of it. Guessing its rules, they play at it, not knowing what the hell it really means and then, once they realize out that it's not Romeo, Juliet, and gondola rides, they work at just-getting-by.

The cast easily faced the challenge of adult actors playing kids who want to be adults and then act like kids, highlighting the difference between being childish and childlike. Nagle's transition from kindergarten playground Casanova Sam, a me-me-me, adorable to embittered and then chastened Dr. Love was exquisitely gawky. Bond's formidable four-year-old Stacey, coltishly-chomping for playground, pre-adolescent romance, contrasted nicely with Nagle's D-Day landing tentativeness. Serving as a splendid example of the triumph of experience over hope, Lee's Katie was a fantastic contrast to Bond's first act Shirley Temple Stacey. A veteran of the love war, she made teeth guards, errant toe nails and body hair sexy, in a MILF sort off way, nailing the *oh fuck, will this never end?* purgatory of a long-term marriage. Her scene with Monahan's Mike at the pick-up bar suggested the Steve Martin and Dan Ackroyd *Two Wild and Crazy Guys* skit.

The best thing about the production, message-wise? Imagine a play, given its world premiere in the capital of microwaved marriages and not one mention of the "D" word. Sweet!

Performances are 8PM, Thursday through Sunday. The show runs until August 1. Tickets are \$20. The Theatre is located at 6322 Santa Monica Boulevard, Hollywood. for more information call (323) 960-7776 or visit <http://www.elephantstages.com/>.