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ROBBIN FROM THE HOOD

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Rob Nagle and Geri Nikole-Love (photo by Lizzie Kimball)

Reviewed by Iris Mann

Road Theatre

Through November 17

RECOMMENDED

This potent and timely world premiere by playwright Marlow Wyatt is inspired by the medieval myth about outlaw Robin Hood. The legendary figure, who stole from the rich and gave to the poor, was portrayed in a group of English ballads — described as overcoming, even killing, authority figures and wealthy landowners who took advantage of the poor and curtailed their right to hunt for food. Wyatt deftly posits a scenario in which the plight, the strivings, the rough edges and the genuine heart of the disadvantaged are exploited by an international corporation and those who profit from it.

In this case, the champion of the poor is an adolescent girl from a poverty-stricken area who laments at one point, “They own everything in all the poor neighborhoods; the liquor store down on 3rd, all the minimarts and check cashing places. They own the grocery stores that sell us secondhand produce for two times the price, making money off everything. Did you know that? They making us pay for being poor.” The play’s theme is particularly relevant today, as the chasm between the haves and have nots is growing ever wider.

The story centers on 17-year-old Robbin Woods (iesha m. daniels, *sic*), whose parents are dead and who lives in the inner city with her grandfather, Percy (William L. Warren). His mind is beginning to wander, while Robbin is a math genius. She and her friend, Juan (Enrike Llamas), a budding artist, have landed an opportunity to be part of a job training program at Kennedy Global (or KG, as it is commonly called), a multinational conglomerate. During their orientation, they meet Margaret Brown (Geri-Nikole Love), head of the training program. The two young people are thrilled by the perks they receive.

In one scene, Margaret explains to Robbin why she chose two adolescents

from an alternative school instead of students from a posh private school. “Nobody chose me,” Margaret says. “I was overlooked, dismissed because of where I came from; a neighborhood similar to yours. I aged out of foster care because nobody chose me. And I spent some time in Juvie, so nobody chose me.”

Eventually, we learn that Margaret is in love and having an affair with company executive Kyle Mayhew (Rob Nagle), who is ambitious and wants to move up in the organization. Margaret hopes he will endorse her idea to have KG sponsor a community development project to aid inner city youth. When Robbin learns of the project, she wants to help make it happen. As things turn out, Kyle has been seeing his estranged wife, who is now pregnant with his child and who is taking a seat on the board of KG. She is against the project, so it is canceled. But Robbin has other ideas.

Director Chuma Gault helms the production expertly, setting just the right pace as the action ebbs and flows, and establishing emotional levels for the actors that fit the tone of each scene. He has also extracted splendid work from his cast.

daniels gives a many-layered performance. She is the quintessential wild child, often raucous and mouthy, sometimes to the point of being off-putting, and with frequently flashing eyes. But she also projects Robbin’s essential good heartedness, which is touching as the character shows great tenderness in caring for her grandfather. In addition, daniels is very moving when the aggressive wild child she portrays tearfully anticipates having nobody as she faces the potential passing of Percy. And she displays the angst that underlies all that Robbin does, as she asks Juan if he thinks they will ever get out. He says, “Get out of what?” She replies, “Poverty. This. Being broke. Struggling for basic shit. Hustlin’ to make ends meet.”

Llamas makes an auspicious and impressive acting debut. He embodies a basic decency in portraying a young man who reveals a supportive strength as he tells Robbin that she can rely on him if and when Percy passes. He is also very convincing as Juan argues for wanting what the company might offer him and maintains that he enjoys the advantages of having a job there so he can buy things for his sister and his father only needs to work one job. The actor has a definite onstage presence.

Love is strong and authoritative as a woman who has worked her way up in life. The actor skillfully reveals another level of her character's strength, including a certain outrage, as she learns that she and her plans for a community project are being rejected. She also disports a very attractive appearance and self-assurance in her performance.

Warren artfully provides a good many of the comedic touches. It is also very moving to watch him communicate the essence of a proud man who is declining but still trying to maintain and take care of whatever family is left in the face of overwhelming poverty and a world in which everything seems stacked against him. He lays bare Percy's desperation in finally talking to the son he has spurned for committing a crime and going to prison, recalling the time he witnessed his own father, who was jailed for taking apples from someone's orchard, working on a chain gang like an animal. "I couldn't bear to see you Charlie, shackled; chains around your wrist. Talkin' at you through a glass, let 'em take away your name and give you a number."

As Charles, the son who has stumbled in life, but who is determined to reform, Joshua R. Lamont manages to make his character sympathetic, while also embodying a certain street savvy. In one section, during which Robbin is visiting him in prison and tells him she is training at KG, Charlie ruefully observes that they are working for the same enterprise. He calls it 21st century slavery. "And Kennedy Global got more plantations

than anybody I know These prisons are set up to make huge profits off inmates; free labor. Clothing and textiles; that's what I do; for 17 cents an hour." Lamont smoothly depicts the varying emotional colors that make up his character.

The very talented Nagle, playing someone who betrays his supposed love interest, adroitly projects the portrait of a mild, even weak man who would like to do the right thing, but whose ambition overpowers any decent instincts he might have. Nagle wisely keeps his character low key instead of falling into the trap of making the man an out-and-out villain. His performance is a welcome counter-balance to the trapped desperation of the other characters.

All in all, this production makes a powerful statement.

Road Theatre Company, 10747 Magnolia Blvd., N. Hollywood.; opens Friday, Oct. 11, 8 pm; Fri.-Sat., 8 pm; Sun., 2 pm; thru Nov. 17.

<https://roadtheatre.org>. Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes with one intermission.

