

STAGE RAW

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SLOW
THUNDER

October 25, 2023

Ann Noble and Robert Yacko (Photo by Suse Sternkopf and Allen Corben/ImageWorks)

Reviewed by F. Kathleen Foley

Theatre 68 Arts Complex

Through November 12

RECOMMENDED

When a local theater puts on a first-class world premiere play, it's an occasion to be celebrated — a heartening indication of the vitality of our indigenous stage community.



Slow Thunder, playwright Suse Sternkopf's gripping new drama now being presented at Theatre 68 Arts Complex, is one such notable event — a deceptively modest examination of the complexities of human love that builds to an emotional crescendo. Sternkopf, who directs her own work with a sure and efficient hand, has wisely assembled a cast of crack theatrical veterans, some of whom will be familiar to Los Angeles audiences.

The action opens in Vieux Carre, where a storm is building on the horizon. However, this isn't the steamy, exotic Vieux Carre of Tennessee Williams fame. This is a sleepy Illinois town whose biggest claim to fame is its 170 foot tall "catsup" bottle, an advertisement for a local manufacturer.

Jewel Turner (Ann Noble), an intellectual property attorney and New York expatriate, has recently retreated to her hometown after having her derelict childhood home painstakingly renovated by former college buddy turned local contractor, Rob Scanlon (Rob Nagle.) These two have become close — very close — but whether their relationship is sexual in nature remains unclear. As we are repeatedly reminded throughout the play, relationships are "complicated."

Jewel's serene evening on her patio is interrupted by the roar of a motorcycle outside. (Janna R. Lopen Råven's sound is the standout of this production design). It's her former lover Peter Norman (Robert Yacko), a famous artist and poet who, after ghosting her and breaking her heart, has impulsively driven 1,000 miles in a quixotic effort to win her back.

Jewel greets Peter with surface calm, but when Rob arrives on the scene, he immediately bristles with hostility and suspicion towards their unexpected visitor. The skein of interactions grows more snarled when Rob, who met Jewel's drunken best friend Bird (Sue Gisser) on his way to pick up takeout, brings her back for their impromptu get-together.

All four are wounded people coping with terrible loss, although Peter, a sexually omnivorous charmer schooled in the art of seduction from an early age, delivers more wounds than he receives. And, with the exception of Peter, all are modestly scaled heroes who are soldiering on with quiet bravery amidst the wreckage of their shattered lives.

As the evening progresses, their carefully constructed masks start to slip. Rob's air of bristly machismo covers his sexual ambiguity and a painful recent breakup. The outrageously flirtatious Bird, a deeply committed neonatal ICU nurse, pretends to be the "town floozy" to disguise the fact that she's an emotional and sexual hermit, a deeply traumatized survivor of childhood sexual abuse. Peter's veneer of enlightened sensitivity camouflages the fact that he is a masterful manipulator who is sadly unaware of his own amorality and emptiness. As for Jewel, her years in New York notwithstanding, she remains a stoical Midwesterner who keeps carefully impassive, while deeper waters roil beneath. When she finally calls Peter out for his unforgivably cavalier behavior, it's a blistering, high-decibel excoriation that makes us want to cheer.

Sternkopf's play isn't perfect by any means. Peter's recapitulation of a speech he recently gave at MOMA, while intellectually diverting, appears misplaced here, and Rob and Peter's subsequent musings about the nature of love ("So love really is a kind of insanity?") seem overly reductive and simplistic. Also, Sternkopf's epigrammatic cleverness ("Don't fall until you see the whites of their lies") can come across as show-boaty.

The staging isn't perfect either. While the actors strike a beautifully naturalistic tone, we lose more than a few snippets here and there in the propulsive flow of dialogue. Still, Sternkopf's flawed, touching and wonderfully realized characters, as performed by this superb cast, strike a deeply emotional chord that will resonate long after you leave the theater.

*Theatre 68 Arts Complex, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hollywood. Fri.-Sat., 8 pm;
Sun., 2 pm; thru November 12.*

*<https://tickettailor.com/events/bafatheatreworks1/1021480#> Running time: 95
minutes with no intermission.*

