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April 02, 2016 12:42PM

Superb acting, set drive psychological drama 'Unsafe'

As the audience files into the theater, there is an unsettling feeling. It's not yet showtime, the house lights are on, and several gritty-looking street boys are hanging out by chain-link fences, which bear makeshift posters reading "Have you seen?" "Missing," and the like. These lost boys reflect the mood of a nation, and the world, in the aftermath of the events of 9/11. Inside the chain-link enclosure sits a small girl playing with rag dolls until her mother comes along and the two exit offstage.

"Unsafe" is a provocative psychological drama which, on the surface, tells the story of how one family was affected by what has come to be known as, simply, 9/11. The play is not by any definition simple, however. It is rich with metaphor, drama, high action and pathos.

Lisa (Anna Botsford) is throwing herself a 40th birthday party, about 18 months after her husband perished in the twin towers. She lives with her special needs child, Georgie (Natalia Tsourides), in a downtown Manhattan loft which was particularly well positioned to witness the collapse of the towers right outside their windows. This is a family far from healed. Lisa's parents arrive at the party: her overbearing, boozing mother Yvonne (Michelle Pelletier) and her supportive, sedate father (H. Kempton Parker). Also in attendance is a doctor/best-selling author, Nate (Tony Travostino) who has been treating Georgie and courting Lisa.

The party begins poorly, with Yvonne drinking too much too quickly, getting the wrong food delivered from the caterer and a raging snowstorm crippling Manhattan. Things get interesting when Willie (Elliot Sicard) arrives, Lisa's troubled stepson who has been out of touch for more than a year. He is disheveled, homeless and apparently in trouble. Big trouble.

As the title suggests, this play explores our vulnerabilities on many levels. Are our enemies easily identified, clearly marked intruders from other lands, other cultures? Or are they among us, part of us?

"Unsafe" poses many intriguing psychological, sociological and political questions through the metaphor of a family drama. The play's structure is brilliantly conceived, with fantastical sequences and elements blending in with the action. The set design and stage direction are essential components to the evening; the visual narrative and physical parlance become sort of ancillary characters, critical to the action. The stark industrial loft space evokes the gray, unforgiving shadow of the two towers in rubble while lighting and creative props enhance and elevate the plot.

A word about the acting: superb. The "wild boys" (who fill dual functions as opening scene extras and onstage stage hands) are by turns fierce and funny. Michelle Pelletier as Yvonne was initially over the top, but as the evening progressed she nailed the nuances of the "aggressive/aggressive mother" with a soft center. Natalia Tsourides was remarkable as Georgie (her sister Alexandra alternates in the role) and the two leads Anna Botsford and Elliot Sicard were authentic, credible and had an on-stage chemistry which resounded. Jim Dalglish deftly directs his own work, establishing mood and choreographing some tricky physical moments.

All that being said, this intelligent, resonant work would benefit from some formidable editing. For all the profound, sad and moving monologues, there are a number of rambling, over-long and unnecessary scenes. This should be a power punch of a play. Unfortunately, the punch is weakened by long and tedious interludes. This problem is exacerbated by weak voice projection by some cast members at moments. Some of the significant passages were not loud enough to distinguish.

This is an ambitious, intelligent and intriguing evening of theater which runs about two and a half hours.

Go for the experience, the writing, the set and the acting. The play moves to Boston on April 15. I hope there are some edits made because, with work, I could see it on Broadway.

On stage

What: "Unsafe"Written and directed by: Jim DalglishDirectorial consultant: Constance CrawfordWhen: 7:30 p.m. Thursdays to Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays through April 10Where: Cotuit Center for the Arts Main Stage; co-produced with Boston Public Works4404 Falmouth Road (Route 28), CotuitTickets: \$28, \$23 for members, \$25 for seniors, \$15 for studentsReservations: 508-428-0669 or artsonthecape.org

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Elliot Sicard, right, plays Will and Anna Botsford is Lisa in Jim Dalglish's "Unsafe," a co-production between Cotuit Center for the Arts and Boston Public Works Theatre Company. JIM DALGLISH