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South Shore Critic

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Cotuit Center for the Arts/BPW's "Unsafe": At Any Speed



Anna Botsford & Elliott Sicard in "Unsafe"
(photo: Jim Dalglish)

Whether they are in the fast lane or a bit more established, the characters in the play *Unsafe* share a commonality, namely that life post 9/11 is unsafe at any speed. This work by Jim Dalglish, a Boston Public Works' co-production with Cotuit Center for the Arts, is now being presented in Cotuit through April 10, then moving to the Plaza Theater at Boston Center for the Arts April 15-30. A semifinalist at the 2008 National Playwright's Conference, it's quite accurately described in the program as a psychological thriller. As such, and as is the case with many mysteries, it presents a challenge for any reviewer: how to critique a work that fundamentally depends on the playwright's gradual revealing of pieces of the jigsaw puzzle in which these characters find themselves. By and large, the play succeeds at this process, but describing precisely how it does so would be to ruin a theatergoer's appreciation of the many revelations without spoiling one's experience with, well, spoilers. The tagline for the show, "be careful who you let inside", while grammatically questionable, can also serve as a caveat for reviewing any play in which so much information is initially withheld: be careful whom you let in on your plot points. That said, there's enough to share to whet one's appetite for such an intriguing work.

In 2003 New York, a family is attempting to pick up the pieces of their lives (for some, almost literally) in the midst of a midwinter New York City blizzard with three feet of snow. It's the occasion of the fortieth birthday of Lisa (Anna Botsford), with her parents Yvonne (Michelle Pelletier) and Guy (H. Kempton Parker) in attendance, along with, curiously, Nathaniel (Tony Travostino), a neurologist who has been studying a disorder afflicting Lisa's daughter Georgie (at the opening performance, Alexandra Tsourides, alternating thereafter with her sister Natalia). It's a rare condition known as Williams Syndrome, occurring with missing chromosomal information, simultaneously resulting in health problems and exceptional verbal and musical precocity. The festivities are interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Will (Elliott Sicard), whose relationship to the family is initially unclear. As the play progresses, there are several surprises that clarify not only the issues currently on hand, but the historical reasons why these family members are so deeply wounded as a result of the iconic terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, especially with the still extant fallout from that tragedy. It has resulted in a pervasive feeling of life as unsafe; as the playwright puts it, "the terror, the pain, the fear that it feeds on...it's here".

About Me



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Jack has been an avid arts critic and travel writer for over four decades.

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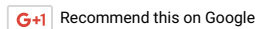
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Before the first word of dialogue is spoken, while theatergoers are finding their seats, we're presented with a group of characters referred to as the "Wild Boys" (Chris Crider, Peter G. Lemire, Ian Morris, Lang Haynes, Nicholas Stewart, and Nick Bucchianeri) who hover and mime menacingly, none of them losing character throughout the course of the show. It's part of an overall unity of concept reflected in the imaginative Scenic Design of a loft apartment by Tristan DiVincenzo (especially an increasingly ominous elevator), as well as the varied Costume Design by Greta Bieg (right down to the holes in Will's socks), effective Lighting Design by Greg Hamm and Sound Design and Musical Composition by Nathan Leigh. How these "Wild Boys" and the creative team's efforts contribute to the effect of the play are also potential spoilers. Suffice it to say that the aforementioned elevator in the renovated complex that Lisa and her daughter continue to inhabit plays a role in establishing a sense of dread. Even the scene changes are handled ingeniously.

As it stands now, this is a taut, engrossing work by a clever playwright who also happens to be the director of the current production. The insight into the underbelly of the play is thus undoubtedly a plus, though it may have resulted in some ambiguity, particularly in the first part of the final scene, where it's unclear that six months have passed and whom the characters in the scene are mourning. That said, it would be an easy fix, eliminating some confusion on the part of the audience as to when and where we are as the play winds down to its devastating climax. There are a few bits of dialogue that sound out of character, such as Will's description of people either as simple as a single cartoon panel or as complex as a five-hundred-page novel. For the most part, though, Dalglish has a great ear for his multifaceted cast, most of whom don't disappoint. Botsford (tightly wound and increasingly unraveling) and Sicard (with his expressively labile face) are very impressive, each with an opportunity to deliver an aria-like turn, and Tsourides is amazingly believable for such a young performer. Not since "The Miracle Worker" has a play depended so profoundly on the skill of a child actor. There were some problems with projection and diction on the part of some of the rest of the cast, but these will probably be resolved with more familiarity with the material and the venue (which, it is safe to reveal, has extraordinarily comfortable seating).

At a crucial point in the dramatic arc of the play, Lisa explains that one of the reasons she remains in her building and cannot leave yet is that it too is "one of the pieces" of the aftermath of tragedy. Dalglish has pulled off a remarkable feat, taking something we all feel we've survived and assimilated, and making the ultimate reveal, namely that we have all been forever changed and, denial aside, we now must be wary, vigilant and, if not precisely unsafe, at least unsettled. This playwright saw something, and said something.

Posted by Jack Craib at 10:05:00 AM



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