

'Dying City' is another Another stunning stage experience at Southern Rep

by David Cuthbert, The Times Picayune Theatre Critic - Friday, January 23, 2009

What makes a good play great?

One definition is that it's one you can continue to explore, making new discoveries. Lines, themes and images reverberate. If the playwright, director, actors and designers have done their jobs, they will realize a good deal of the text in a single performance. A great play intrigues to the point that you want to confirm or question your initial reactions.

Christopher Shinn's "Dying City" is such a play. It was a revelation seeing it enacted on the stage of Southern Rep, even though I had read it several times, attended a rehearsal and interviewed its principals. "Dying City" still had the power to surprise and disturb as it delved with a vibrant immediacy into increasingly serious subject matter and dark humor.

"Dying City" concerns the truths and lies we tell one another to get by in life and what can happen when we acknowledge them as such.

Kelly is a young Manhattan therapist whose husband, Craig, has died mysteriously in Iraq -- mysterious because there is denial of what really happened, "Something Unspoken," as Tennessee Williams put it.

Shinn's story is how Kelly comes to terms with two shattering nights: this one, when brother-in-law Peter turns up on her doorstep unexpectedly; and one a little more than a year ago, when Peter spent part of the night with the couple before Craig left for training.

Peter's appearance -- in every sense -- unnerves Kelly. Her husband's identical twin is the dead made manifest. The play shifts back and forth between the two nights, until past and present collide.

"Dying City" has a gimmick, in that Pete McElligott plays both Peter and Craig. There are showy quick-changes, but more impressive is the way McElligott differentiates the roles. Craig's voice has more timbre, and he's more physically grounded. Ostensibly, Craig is the responsible "good" guy.

Peter is a vain, entertaining, self-deprecating actor -- gay, promiscuous, ruled by emotion. Craig is his hero; he started acting by imitating Craig. Pretending is a subtext here. The characters refer to events in their lives as "drama." The men are playing roles, even in their attitudes toward war.

When Peter visits Kelly, it's more of an ambush. There's awkward, friendly banter that gives way to confession: Peter has walked off the stage and out of the theater in mid-performance, after his stage father in "Long Day's Journey Into Night" (significantly enough) has whispered a spiteful put-down to Peter, one calculated to destroy his confidence. Peter also has left his stable lover, taken up with a dangerous previous partner and has risky sex on the side. But he's really there to read Craig's e-mails from Iraq and sound out Kelly on the idea of his turning them into a one-man show in which Peter would -- again -- play his brother.

All of this summons memories Kelly would like to forget. The Craig in flashbacks isn't heroic. He's confrontational, secretive, reacting to his wife's affection with rough, demeaning, sexual behavior. Is Craig "acting" Peter?

The brothers are more alike than one might think. Craig's gradually revealed, overt callousness toward Kelly is mirrored by Peter's more passive-aggressive approach; he begins his "performance" of the e-mails with a page that has a reference certain to devastate Kelly, as it does.

Angelena Swords makes an impressive local debut as Kelly. Swords plays her as aware (understanding human behavior is her job, after all), honest, confused, deeply hurt and holding on for dear life.

McElligott's Peter is an unsparing portrait of the actor as immature hedonist (Jeremy Piven leaving the run of "Speed-the-Plow" on Broadway comes to mind), someone who wants to be liked, yet does everything he can to make that impossible. McElligott's intense Craig is a grenade about to go off.

There are almost endless levels to "Dying City," and under Julie Hamberg's meticulous, penetrating direction, they are deftly unearthed and laid bare.

Geoffrey Hall's smart, spare Manhattan apartment set is dominated by a monolithic white slab, evoking a whitewashed New Orleans tombstone, set against an indigo background sprinkled with pinpoints of white. In concert with Marty Sachs' lighting, the effect is very "Lost in the Stars."

In the midst of death, there is life in "Dying City" and at Southern Rep. What more can you ask of theater?



John B. Barrois / Southern Rep

Angelena Swords and Pete McElligott grapple with 'the truths and lies we tell one another to get by in life' in 'Dying City.'



John B. Barrois / Southern Rep

Angelena Swords portrays Kelly, a woman who struggles not only with her relationship with her dead husband, but also his twin brother. Both men are played by Pete McElligott in Christopher Shinn's 'Dying City.'

DYING CITY

What: Christopher Shinn's play, directed by Julie Hamberg.

With: Pete McElligott and Angelena Swords.

Where: Southern Rep, 3rd Floor Shops Level, Canal Place, 365 Canal St.

When: Performances Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m. through Feb. 8. Audience talk-backs after Sunday matinees.

Tickets: \$22-\$27. \$10 student rush tickets 15 minutes before curtain, cash only with student ID.

Call: 504.522.6545 or www.southernrep.com

Related topics: Christopher Shinn, Dying City, Southern Rep

please note: This was David Cuthbert's final review for the Times Picayune, therefore Entertainment Editor Ann Maloney's name was added to the *online Nola.com* review at a later date.