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THEATER REVIEW | 'THE DARK AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS'

Those Stairs Are Dark at the Bottom, Too

By CHARLES ISHERWOOD
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“The Dark at the Top of the Stairs,” the last major play by William Inge, turns 50 this year. The Transport Group, a likeably eclectic Off Broadway company that mounts meticulous productions of plays and musicals both old and new, is marking the occasion by staging the official anniversary revival at the Connelly Theater in the East Village. But don't bring the festive hats and noisemakers. The play is anything but a party.



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times
The stairs in question: Colby Minifie, left, and Donna Lynne Champlin.

The Main Street parade of woe Inge sets plainly before us includes two unhappy marriages (one mildly abusive, the other sexually barren); a movie-star-obsessed little boy tormented by the neighborhood toughs; a pathologically shy 16-year-old girl so afraid of life she throws up at the thought of attending a party; and a gentle-hearted Jewish adolescent killed by a lethal combination of parental neglect and anti-Semitism. Small-town life in the Midwest in the 1920s was obviously no picnic, if you'll pardon the pun.

A critical and commercial success on Broadway in 1957, the play is esteemed by many of Inge's admirers as his finest achievement. If grimness guaranteed greatness, it would be hard to argue the point. For his masterwork, “A Streetcar Named Desire,” after all, Inge's friend [Tennessee Williams](#) had to make do with just one slightly strained marriage and a neurotic who goes nuts. Inge set himself a smorgasbord of quiet misery to work with.

But for me this somber slab of Americana, set in Oklahoma but based in part on Inge's own upbringing in Kansas, remains a sturdily crafted and sincerely felt but ultimately shallow play. (I have now seen it twice in the last year.) Spanning three acts and nearly three hours, it is uncommonly dreary without being particularly powerful.

Jack Cummings III, the Transport Group's artistic director, clearly believes in the play's stature, and Inge's too. (The company's second production was an evening of Inge's one-acts called “Requiem for William.”) He has staged “The Dark at the Top of the Stairs” with a respect bordering on reverence.

Straining away the naturalism the play would seem to demand, Mr. Cummings enlists a

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battery of arty theatrical effects in an attempt to bring out its poetry.

The set designer, Sandra Goldmark, transforms the modest living room of the Flood family into a clean empty space divided by scrims. Behind these a few pieces of furniture can be glimpsed in soft pools of light. Piano music — mellow, frenzied or somber, as needed — introduces each scene and punctuates dramatic passages. The intricate lighting design by R. Lee Kennedy accentuates certain speeches and exchanges. Gauzy shadows quickly gather and then suddenly dissipate, and silhouettes of the titular staircase bloom and fade on the scrims. When characters head upstairs, they do indeed vanish into a symbolic darkness.

Mr. Cummings has put a lot of thought into his production, and these effects are undeniably pretty and well executed. But a stylized *mise-en-scène* can't really shoehorn poetry into a fundamentally prosaic play. Inge's characters suffer mightily, but in plain words and in homely ways. They never assume the spiritual dimensions that give theatrical stature to the tortured men and women in the plays of Williams and Eugene O'Neill. Even on the rare occasions when they turn a pretty phrase or conjure a bleak insight into the loneliness or hardship of life, their feet are always on the ground. In the end I'm afraid Mr. Cummings's honorable attempt to transfer the characters' pangs to the plane of archetype only serves to underscore their unfitness for the journey.

If any true magic is to emerge in a staging of "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs," I suspect the poetics of extraordinary acting would have to supply it. ([Elia Kazan](#), who elicited more than a few legendary stage performances in his long career, was at the helm of the original production, which starred [Teresa Wright](#); Harold Clurman called it "one of Kazan's finest feats.") The acting in Mr. Cummings's production is accomplished, but the cast rarely digs beneath the play's plain-spoken surfaces to suggest any more complicated layers underneath.

In the central role of Cora Flood, whose marriage is on the verge of collapse under the pressure of economic and emotional strife, Donna Lynn Champlin hits all the right notes — maternal tenderness and frustration, wifely resentment and affection — cleanly if not always subtly. Michele Pawk injects a needed note of exuberant vulgarity into the cool proceedings as Cora's sister, Lottie, who stops by for fried chicken and gossip accompanied by her wood chip of a husband, played somnolently by Jay Potter. And Patrick Boll is excellent as the stolid Rubin Flood, Cora's salesman husband, who feels alienated from his own family and lost in a world rapidly moving forward as he stands still.

The young Jack Tartaglia, who plays the 10-year-old Sonny, has an unusually prominent role in Mr. Cummings's production, which subtly recasts the play as a long, haunting montage of memory echoing sadly in Sonny's mind. Mr. Tartaglia shoulders his expanded burden well, giving a performance that doesn't stint on the boy's peskiness and oddity. Sonny casts sinister, slightly contemptuous glances at dad, torments his sensitive sister to the breaking point, manipulates mother with the calculating intelligences of a fellow thrice his age. The chilly tinge of Mr. Cummings's production aims to emphasize all the damaging pain the poor boy witnessed, but little Sonny seems to be having a much better time than anyone else.

THE DARK AT THE TOP OF THE STAIRS

By William Inge; directed by Jack Cummings III; sets by Sandra Goldmark; lighting by R. Lee Kennedy; costumes by Shana Albery; sound by Michael Rasbury; wig design by Paul Huntley; stage manager, Theresa Flanagan; associate director, Gregg Wiggans; dramaturg, Adam Perlman; production stage manager, Wendy Patten; production

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manager, Travis Walker; technical director, Ryan Wentworth; general manager, Michael Coglán. Presented by the Transport Group, Mr. Cummings, artistic director. At the Connolly Theater, 220 East Fourth Street, East Village; (212) 352-3101. Through April 21. Running time: 2 hours, 45 minutes.

WITH: Patrick Boll (Rubin Flood), Donna Lynne Champlin (Cora Flood), Jack Tartaglia (Sonny Flood), Michele Pawk (Lottie Lacey), Paul Iacono (Punky Givens), Liz Mamana (Flirt Conroy), Colby Minifie (Reenie Flood), Jay Potter (Morris Lacey) and Matt Yeager (Sammy Goldenbaum).

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