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04/09/2007

The Dark at the Top of the Stairs

By: *Victor Gluck*



Donna Lynne Champlin and Michele Pawk
 (photo credit: Carol Rosegg)

The stage is empty except for a scrim with an archway off center. Through the arch can be seen a staircase disappearing up to a second story. The lighting throws huge shadows of the balustrade across to stage right. **Discordant piano music sets the tone for strife and heartbreak.** A small boy appears and stands absolutely still listening to a violent unseen argument as his parents tear into each other from the upper floor.

Using this stripped down setting, director Jack Cummings III has staged the first New York revival of William Inge's 1957 *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* in 27 years as expressionistic theater. It uses Harold Pinter pauses on a set intended for a Samuel Beckett drama of the human condition. **The results are not only truly magnificent, but this pared-down production rediscovers new depths in a play up until now seen as a conventional, realistic family drama.**

Throughout the performance you could have heard a pin drop as the audience hung on every word and every nuance from the excellent cast. **The expressionistic staging forces** both the actors and the audience to concentrate entirely on the words and the characterizations. With a company entirely in tune with this concept, the production is an extraordinary experience. It may not tell us anything we didn't know, but it reveals depths rarely seen on the American stage or in American drama. The play is revealed as Inge's *Long Day's Journey into Night*.

William Inge seems to have become the forgotten man among famous American playwrights. In the 1950's, he appeared on the scene with four smash hits in a row all of which were soon turned into highly successful films: *Come Back, Little Sheba, Picnic, BusStop*, and the autobiographical *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. These plays along with his original screenplay for *Splendor in the Grass* won him the Pulitzer Prize, the Academy Award, and two Tony Award nominations for Best Play in a matter of ten years. And then he had three Broadway flops in a row, took his name off the credits of his next film, and disappeared from the theater. He wrote two novels before committing suicide at age sixty in 1973. His reputation has never recovered up until now.

Set in a small town near Oklahoma City in 1923, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* tells the story of the dysfunctional Flood family: Rubin, a traveling salesman who prefers to stay on the road rather than come home; Cora, his wife, who resents the necessary penny pinching and finds her husband brutal and insensitive to her needs; teenage daughter Reenie who is shy and hates social situations; and introverted 10 year old Sonny who stays at home to look at his pictures of film stars rather than join the other boys outside. When Rubin and Cora's fight escalates over money problems, he storms out saying he will not return. Cora immediately calls her married sister Lottie and her brother-in-law Morris to help sort out the family crisis.

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Inge uses this framework to explore sexual problems, economic depression, family violence, anti-Semitism, and class prejudice. It is not new that small towns are such a hotbed of unrest, but Inge peels away layer upon layer of social intercourse to reveal the seething passions and problems underneath. Most probably an examination of Inge's own childhood memories, *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs* takes apart two marriages: one seemingly good on the surface and one seemingly bad.



Patrick Boll and Donna Lynne Champlin
(photo credit: Carol Rosegg)

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Michele Pawk makes the loud, voluble sister Lottie into a star turn. She runs the entire gamut of emotions as an unfulfilled wife who appears to the outside world to have everything she wants. As her catatonic husband undergoing his own midlife crisis, Jay Potter makes the Pinter pause into a chilling device. Patrick Boll as Rubin is all explosive anger in the opening scene, but when we see him next he lowers his voice and reveals his pain at a level that is almost a new art form. As Cora, who is on stage almost continually during this three act play, Donna Lynne Champlin is mainly asked to react to the situations that occur. By the end of the play, she has come to a new understanding of her husband and her marriage.

The play's young people are particularly fine. Jack Tartaglia is a natural as the introverted 10 year son prone to temper tantrums when he doesn't get his way. As his shy teenage sister, Colby Minifie has refined a whine to a physical manifestation of her unhappiness. Matt Yeager as a Jewish military cadet who is her blind date for a party is cheerful and endearing as a young man hiding behind insurmountable problems. Liz Mamana is delightful as Reenie's gossipy tactless friend Flirt while Paul Iacono is amusing as her drunken date.

It is to his credit that director Cummings has left the play in its three act form when so many recent revivals attempt to shorten plays into two parts. R. Lee Kennedy's magnificent lighting design turns the shadows into a kind of symphony of light while at the same time depicting the undercurrents in the Flood family. The minimalist setting is the work of Sandra Goldmark, while Shana Albery's attractive but unobtrusive monochromatic costumes never distract from the director's concept. Even Cummings's stage groupings are memorable in the Transport Group's 50th anniversary production of *The Dark at the Top of the Stairs*. Long before dysfunctional families were the staple of films, stage and television, this play dared to take a look at the conflicts both spoken and unspoken that can tear human relationships apart.

The Dark at the Top of the Stairs (through April 21)

Connelly Theatre, 220 E. 4th Street, between Aves. A and B, in Manhattan

For tickets, call 212-352-3101 or <http://www.theatremania.com>
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