



VARIETY | INDUSTRY NEWS | WEB | Search

DIGITAL VARIETY > | SUBSCRIBE > | LOGIN >

DEPARTMENTS: FILM TV INT'L BIZ MUSIC TECH LEGIT HOME ENT. SECTIONS: V PLUS REVIEWS BLOGS MORE

FEATURED LINKS: Award Central | VARIETY CAREERS

# LEGIT

Posted: Thurs., Apr. 5, 2007, 4:59pm PT

EMAIL | PRINT | CONTACT | RSS

Off Broadway

## The Dark at the Top of the Stairs (Connelly Theater; 99 seats; \$20 top)

By MARK BLANKENSHIP

A Transport Group presentation of a play in three acts by William Inge. Directed by Jack Cummings III.

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



Donna Lynne Champlin and Jack Tartaglia play mother and son in a stylized revisiting of William Inge's 'The Dark at the Top of the Stairs.'

The Transport Group has transformed William Inge's 1957 chestnut "The Dark at the Top of the Stairs" from a realistic drama about an entire family's dysfunction into a nightmarish evocation of one man's psychological scars. The play is Inge's most autobiographical, and helmer Jack Cummings III places his expressionistic production literally inside the playwright's head. With often harrowing results, the director demonstrates how exposure to guilt, anger and shame can warp someone forever.

Cummings makes his point by enhancing the role of Sonny (Jack Tartaglia), a 10-year-old boy usually read as Inge's stand-in. In the opening image, which is not in the original script, the child gets loaded with significance. Alone onstage, he sits with his back to us in an uncomfortable-looking chair, one of the few props on Sandra Goldmark's eerily empty set. Without moving, Sonny stares at the top of a staircase, listening to his parents Cora (Donna Lynne Champlin) and Rubin (Patrick Boll) argue. Cummings keeps most of their fight off-stage, so we hear the dialogue echo through a distorted microphone.

This barren place, with bodiless voices booming through the air, is like a terrible memory. The suggestion is that the boy -- who moves through the entire production like a sleepwalker, few expressions cracking his stony face -- is trapped, forced to watch his parents fight, his mother love her children with twisted obsession, and his sister (Colby Minifie) disastrously attempt to date a boy. Even when other characters appear and the traditional plot gets moving, that creepy tension can be felt.

That's thanks largely to Cummings' exceptional use of the set. The walls give the impression of a living room, but when light hits them, they're translucent. Thesps standing behind the screens are hazy images, and there's a consistent shock in seeing distorted people suddenly become clear when they step into plain view.

Cummings manipulates this effect in inventive ways. Sometimes it tells us which memories will haunt Sonny the most, like when Rubin slaps Cora at the end of their opening argument. We don't see the blow, but we do see Champlin stumble into view behind a screen and then finally walk onstage. How appropriate that the most

Weekly Variety  
Without the smudgy fingers  
CLICK COVER FOR DIGITAL EDITION  
CLICK HERE FOR ARCHIVES  
FAQ

PAST ISSUES:  
Wednesday 04/11/2007  
Thursday 04/12/2007  
Friday 04/13/2007

Advertisement for DEG (The Digital Entertainment Group) featuring the text: Expert analysis. Targeted data.

Newsletters VIEW SAMPLES > SIGN UP >

Productions FILM SUBMISSIONS > TV SUBMISSIONS >

Market Listings MIP SUBMISSIONS > SUBMISSION DEADLINES >

Real Estate FEATURED LISTING > VIEW ALL LISTINGS >

Advertisement for OPEN FOR BUSINESS featuring the text: TURN EXPENSES INTO REWARDS. Includes an American Express Business card image and an APPLY NOW button.

Featured Jobs  
A "Special Assistant" to VP Marketing NYC Film Corp.  
New York  
New York Career Links Agency  
Manager Consumer Marketing  
New York  
New York Confidential  
Systems Engineer  
UNIVERSAL CITY  
CA NBC Universal  
Clerk  
CityWalk Hilltop Operations  
UNIVERSAL CITY, CA NBC Universal

KEYWORD

terrifying parts are the most obscure. That way, they can better haunt the imagination.

The production maintains mystique with a pace slightly slower than reality. For instance, before Rubin storms out for good -- thus launching the play's major plot arc about Cora trying to keep her family and sanity in check -- we see the children slink behind a screen to listen to the fighting. They move like they're underwater, heightening our awareness that the parents don't realize how much their children know.

As evocative as it is, however, the production's tone can't quite sustain three acts. The first segment crackles because the director's techniques still feel new and because Champlin and Boll tear so ferociously into their scenes. Both thespians are a part of the production's stylized world, keeping their gestures to a minimum and holding poses for ages, but they work the austerity to their advantage. Hand movements feel momentous when they're rarely used, and they accentuate the power of the actors' thundering voices.

But the fire dies in acts two and three. The life seeps out of most perfs -- save a charming Michele Pawk as Cora's ribald sister -- until the actors seem icily detached, committed more to the production's symbolic conceits than to the play those elements are meant to support.

It's understandable that Cummings would want to avoid the hysterics that can make Inge's writing feel so old-fashioned, but when Rubin returns to deliver a speech about feeling left behind by technology, the show has become too much of an intellectual exercise to allow for vulnerability. And a final parade of Sonny's demons, again added by Cummings, lacks the immediacy of the opening.

It's when the Transport Group's intelligent interpretation makes room for raw energy that the legacy of a miserable childhood can feel truly terrifying.

Sets, Sandra Goldmark; costumes, Shana Albery; lighting, R. Lee Kennedy; sound, Michael Rasbury; wigs, Paul Huntley; dramaturg, Adam Perlman; production stage manager, Theresa Flanagan. Opened April 5, 2007. Reviewed April 4. Running time: 2 HOURS, 45 MIN.

Variety is striving to present the most thorough review database. To report inaccuracies in review credits, please [click here](#). We do not currently list below-the-line credits, although we hope to include them in the future. Please note we may not respond to every suggestion. Your assistance is appreciated.



**GET A DECISION  
IN 60 SECONDS**

CATEGORY  
  
 CITY:

[VARIETYCAREERS.COM >](http://VarietyCareers.com)

[click to apply now](#)

Sponsored By:

**Illness Leads Need for Disability Coverage**

**Online Survey Tools Bring You Closer to Your Customers**

**Manage Healthcare Costs Through Health Savings Accounts**

Date in print: Mon., Apr. 9, 2007, Weekly

 EMAIL
  PRINT
  CONTACT
  RSS

**Ads By Google**

<p><b>Boston Video Production</b> Broadcast /Corporate/Full Service DVD, CD, Editing, Camera Crews, Web <a href="http://www.allenrochegroup.com">www.allenrochegroup.com</a></p>	<p><b>Sell Your Script/TV Idea</b> Email 3000 agents/producers/prodcos Respon in hours/clients worldwide <a href="http://www.screenplaywritersconnectio n.com">www.screenplaywritersconnectio n.com</a></p>	<p><b>Movie Production</b> Shoot Film in Hands-on Workshops With 16mm, 35mm, HD cameras <a href="http://www.nyfa.com">www.nyfa.com</a></p>
--	---	--

**RELATED REVIEWS:**

- [Anne of Green Gables - 4/5/2007 3:40:41 PM](#)

---

- [Exits and Entrances - 4/4/2007 5:00:00 PM](#)

---

- [Face the Music - 3/30/2007 4:49:06 PM](#)

---

- [Essential Self-Defense - 3/28/2007 5:00:00 PM](#)

---

- [The Broadway Musicals of 1938 - 3/27/2007 11:38:59 AM](#)

---

- [Some Men - 3/26/2007 5:00:00 PM](#)

[SUBSCRIBE](#)   [LOGIN](#)   [ABOUT US](#)   [ADVERTISE](#)   [CONTACT US](#)   [HELP](#)

RELATED SITES: [Broadcasting & Cable](#) | [Multichannel News](#) | [Video Business](#) | [ContentAgenda](#) | [Twice](#) | [Stylephile](#) | [LA 411](#) | [NY 411](#) | [Media Jobs](#)

© 2007  Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. Use of this website is subject to its [Terms & Conditions of Use](#). View our [Privacy Policy](#).

MEDIA & PUBLISHING: <a href="#">LA 411</a>   <a href="#">New York 411</a>   <a href="#">Video Business</a>   <a href="#">ContentAgenda</a>   <a href="#">Broadcasting &amp; Cable</a>   <a href="#">Multichannel News</a>   <a href="#">Publishers Weekly</a>   <a href="#">Library Journal</a>   <a href="#">School</a>	BUSINESS & PRINTING: <a href="#">DM2</a>   <a href="#">Zibb</a>   <a href="#">Packaging Digest</a>   <a href="#">Graphics Arts Monthly</a>   <a href="#">Graphics Arts Blue Book</a>   <a href="#">Converting</a>   <a href="#">Expert Business Source</a>   <a href="#">Hot Frog</a>	ELECTRONICS: <a href="#">EDN</a>   <a href="#">Twice</a>   <a href="#">Electronic News</a>   <a href="#">Electronic Business</a>   <a href="#">Test &amp; Measurement World</a>   <a href="#">Semiconductor International</a>   <a href="#">Semisource</a>   <a href="#">Instat</a>
---	--	--

[Library Journal](#) | [Criticas](#) | [Tradeshaw Week](#) | [The Industry Measure](#)

MANUFACTURING:

[Design News](#) | [Control Engineering](#) | [Plant Engineering](#) | [Purchasing](#) | [Logistics Management](#) | [Industrial Distribution](#) | [Supply Chain Management Review](#) | [Modern Materials Handling](#) | [Manufacturing Business Technology](#) | [Kellysearch](#)

GIFTS & FURNISHINGS:

[Furniture Today](#) | [Home Textiles Today](#) | [Home Accents Today](#) | [Casual Living](#) | [Kids Today](#) | [Gifts & Decorative Accessories](#) | [Playthings](#) | [Jlrs, Circ, Keystone](#)

HOSPITALITY:

[Hotels](#) | [R&I](#) | [Chain Leader](#) | [Foodservice Equipment & Supplies](#)

BUILDING & CONSTRUCTION:

[Consulting Specifying Engineer](#) | [Interior Design](#) | [Bldg Design & Construction](#) | [Construction Equipment](#) | [HousingZone](#) | [Professional Builder](#) | [Professional Remodeler](#) | [Associated Construction Publications](#) | [Reed First Source](#) | [RS Means](#) | [Reed Construction Data](#) | [Building Team Forecast](#) | [Reed Construction Bulletin](#) | [Reed Connect](#)