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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

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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 performances -- 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 Ruben 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.

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