

# Critic's Notebook Character development counts in bringing plays to life onstage

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LOS ANGELES TIMES

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AUGUST 7, 2015, 10:00 AM

**S**hortly after savoring Rogue Machine Theatre's scrupulously acted production of Samuel D. Hunter's "A Permanent Image" and just before attending the much-praised Antaeus Company revival of William Inge's "Picnic," I felt awash in gratitude for plays that won't ever become classics but provide actors with rich opportunities to wield their interpretive art.

"A Permanent Image" is that species of playwriting frowned upon by the snootier factions of the avant-garde — the domestic drama. Two adult siblings with matching psychological baggage have returned to their childhood home in Idaho after the death of their father, only to learn that his death was a suicide and that their cantankerous mother is planning to off herself in exactly the same way.

This setup is the least interesting thing about Hunter's play, which becomes contrived when the plot gains the upper hand over the author's finely honed character observations. Indeed, the family dynamics are what make this play so compulsively watchable, especially when performed by a cast as adroit as the one director John Perrin Flynn has assembled for his Rogue Machine production (running at Theatre/Theater through Aug. 31).

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The dialogue is only half the fun. The other half is made up of the reactions of the characters to whatever has just been said — or conspicuously not said, as is often the case here. When Carol, the mother who introduces herself to us by shooting a neighbor's barking dog with a BB gun, is questioned about her drinking, the expressions on Anne Gee Byrd's face say more about the alcoholic character's frustration and resentment than any words Hunter, the talented author of "The Whale" and "A Bright New Boise," could put into her mouth.

Carol is tired of explaining herself and doesn't think her son and daughter, who have kept a safe distance since leaving home, have any business passing judgment. She'd like to be conciliatory as a final gesture to her children, but as Byrd's body language makes clear, her rage needs to vent or it will boil over.

Bo, the photojournalist son played by Ned Mochel, would rather be snapping shots of war atrocities than sitting in the house where he has so many miserable memories. He tries to conceal his disdain for what he left behind, but his lesbian sister, Ally (a pitch-perfect Tracie Lockwood), catches every shade of condescension on his face.

The way Lockwood's Ally responds to her family, the quicksilver shifts from grief to scorn to unbridled fury, was a play within itself. Hunter weaves into this character, who is hiding that her wife has left her, an array of contradictory qualities, and Lockwood makes every one of them seem natural.

Carol and Bo bait and bicker with distressed conviction. The fighting among the characters (which includes Mark L. Taylor's Martin, the children's dead father, who left a video message behind) is riveting largely because the internal battles are so sharply illuminated.

So consider me officially behind the times: Years after postmodernism declared "character" dead, I still believe that the human being is the essential building block of the theater.

My taste isn't especially conservative. A diet of Horton Foote plays would leave me ravenous for adventure. But I prefer even the wildest rides to be personally inhabited. A theater of images, no matter how visually entrancing, is numbing to me. Some go to the theater to spin theoretical concepts. I go to reflect on the mystery of consciousness and existence.

But this is an era without much interest in old-fashioned psychological rumination. No longer are we the sum of our conflicts. The fashionable paradigm of the day is that we are the puppets of our neurotransmitters. This scientific shift, while setting in motion advances in certain psychiatric treatments, hasn't yet opened important new ground in the theater.

Two key epochs of playwriting greatness in the modern age — the late 19th century with August Strindberg, Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov and the mid-20th century with Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams — happened alongside major acting developments (the "system" developed by Konstantin Stanislavsky and the "method" that evolved from Stanislavsky's American interpreters), both of which were tied to breakthroughs in the understanding of human behavior.

Psychology wasn't everything to these writers or the actors who illuminated their plays — politics, aesthetics and philosophy jostled for pride of place — but there was an interest in burrowing beneath the surface to access the history secretly coloring present action.

As a critic, I am profoundly moved by actors who want to dig beyond the obvious facets of their roles, who are courageous and perceptive when ambiguity and internal division are silently lurking and who are eager to explore with their fellow performers the subtextual drives propelling the drama.

Sometimes you don't know what you're missing until you come upon it. The clarifying and deeply committed interplay of the actors in Rogue Machine's "A Permanent Image" whet my appetite for the Antaeus production of "Picnic," an ensemble drama born out of the Freudian 1950s.

Inge, famous for "Bus Stop" and "Come Back, Little Sheba," is a writer who is sometimes dismissed as a milquetoast Tennessee Williams. But his plays have a piercing emotionalism that can be a gift to actors who know the difference between genuine feeling and sentimentality.

Set in a small Kansas town, "Picnic" revolves around the destabilizing effect a handsome stranger named Hal has on two sisters, one of whom is lured away from her rich boyfriend by this sweaty Adonis, who is hired by a widowed neighbor to do odd jobs.

The original 1953 Broadway production featured Kim Stanley as tomboyish Millie and Janice Rule as her beauty queen sister, Madge, who eventually chooses sensuality and danger over respectability and safety. Rule talked about her offstage work with Stanley, who would become an Actors Studio legend, in "The Player: A Profile of an Art" by Lillian Ross and Helen Ross: "...Kim and I believed that these two sisters were very vulnerable to each other. Kim helped me to develop in a rounded fashion what the two sisters felt for each other. Just in chatting with her about the characters, I began to understand what the sisters might have been like *off* the stage."

Rule wasn't content to play the pretty sister as glamorously aloof. She drew on things within herself to show that her character "felt inferior in some way but was inarticulate — was hurt by the younger sister but was unable to defend herself." This is the kind of actor engagement and excavation that I had hoped to see in Cameron Watson's production (running through Aug. 30 at Antaeus' home in North Hollywood), and there were flickers of it, to be sure.

Unfortunately, Antaeus' practice of double casting inhibited this to an extent. The ensemble I saw was melded from the two casts, and the actors, particularly the supporting players, didn't always connect to one another. At times they seemed to be shouting their lines into some middle distance. Jackie Preciado's Millie and Jordan Monaghan's Madge, however, fell into sync at key moments. And with Ross Philips making Madge's wealthy beau, Alan Seymour, more than a spoiled rich kid, this mix-and-match "Picnic" was ultimately a worthwhile outing.

At this point in my theatergoing life, when I've seen a great many of the classics and quite a few demi-classics more than once, I don't want museum reconstructions of famous texts. I want the work to be reborn again by actors who are living the scenes before us as if for the first time. I want to be surprised. I want to see aspects of these characters that my own reading of the play failed to reveal. The only way that can happen is if the actors themselves are open to making unexpected discoveries each time they perform.

Echo Theater Company, which has cultivated a community of top-flight actors, would be my go-to place in Los Angeles for this type of symbiotic ensemble acting. But I don't come upon it these days as often as I would hope.

Although I'm not an avid TV watcher, this kind of work seems to be happening fairly regularly on the small screen where actors (and viewers) get to know characters over several seasons. What got me hooked (for a time, anyway) on "Breaking Bad" and "Nurse Jackie" (whenever the great Edie Falco was on camera) and made me mourn the prematurely canceled "Looking" wasn't the overstretched plotting of these shows but the actors' deepening

character work. (Feel free to email me suggestions: I need a new series fix.)

But, of course, ensemble playing that endows writing with unforeseen meanings and heft was born in the theater. I'll console myself that I'm not turning into a middle-aged fuddy-duddy by recalling the example of the eternally young Shakespeare. In his superb 2013 book "Shakespeare in Company," Oxford professor Bart van Es persuasively argues that Shakespeare became the path-breaking dramatist adored by posterity through his involvement with an acting company that made it "easier for him to envisage dramatic relationships within a group."

Shakespeare knew the players he was writing for, but equally important, his players knew one another. This familiarity encouraged a freedom that led to an unprecedented complexity.

Actors don't necessarily have to be part of a repertory ensemble to achieve this kind of theatrical aliveness. They don't even have to be in plays as magisterial as "Hamlet" or "As You Like It," as the Rogue Machine production of "A Permanent Image" attests. All that's needed is an openness to the unpredictable theatrical moment.

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