

Lighting the Way Back

Alice Jackins – Directing Project

I saw *Lighting the Way Back* twice because the first time I saw it, I was so taken by the mastery of the storytelling that I did not focus on the directing components enough to evaluate them. The choice of play and its placement in the evening was exquisite. The personalized text made me curious if the playwright had instructed the production to personalize the text to each venue. Seamless storytelling made it difficult to recognize how the various components (light, set, costumes, blocking, performance) came together to create the sense of time, place, and longing that suffuse the production and created a poignant narrative.

Tonally the piece evokes a sense of mystery, wistfulness, and tension without danger. The lighting and set design highlighted the wonder an unopened Pandora's box can inspire in the curious faced with a neglected and abandoned site. Although there was not an audible, distinct sound design (the sound design might have been surreptitious, working subconsciously) the big empty space and the audience quiet breathing created the sense of eerie hollowness that big empty spaces can evoke. The audience's engagement was apparent as the story unfolded. When it became clear that we were witnessing a future that is directly extrapolated from our present, i.e. the pandemic and social and political unrest, the audience's recognition never took them out of the world of the play. When they recognized the found relics, hand sanitizer and cellphone, were our mundane possessions, they laughed briefly but did not allow their recognition to pull them away from the narrative on stage. There was an unhurried casualness in the quotidian rhythm of the actors' speech and movement. We are told that drama requires conflict, and as theatre artists we look for heightened emotion and physically expressive behavior to maintain the audience's attention. There was nothing like that in *Light the Way Home*. This was a small, sweet, sad bijou off a play well told.

On my second visit I began taking apart the directing elements that went into making the play a seamless narrative.

Set:

Using “abandoned” props and set pieces from the earlier performances strewn “haphazardly” around the space was an inspired or perhaps obvious choice. Insulting the flowers used in the previous unsettling intimate-violence play was an effective call back to the evening’s work. That, and the familiar set pieces, tied the audience to the theater’s “past” and heighten our curiosity of, and investment in, this theater’s prospects one hundred or more years in the future. Although the set pieces appeared haphazardly left about as one might expect in an abandoned and neglected space, it was clear that their placement was specific and arranged to activate the floor plan. The inclusion of a ladder mid to up-center stage was an inspired touch and quickly recognizable for people who work in theatre because in all theaters when production is in the process of being mounted, if there aren’t actors using the space the likelihood of finding a ladder set somewhere on the stage is high. Even though I know the play is set in a post-apocalyptic reality there was something touching about seeing that familiar hallmark off our rehearsal hall in that space. Also the ladder and the non-configured stage suggest that things were interrupted mid-preparation for a production because the stage was not properly tidied and no stage manager would let that happen.

The set pieces and the floor plan were well used. The depth of the set was fully used as the actors came close to the audience and almost to the back wall. The full width of the stage was not used, but what was used was more than sufficient. The director took every opportunity to create diagonals. The diagonals were not only made with the actors’ bodies in a variety of arrangement in relations to the front of the stage but the director took several opportunities to create diagonal using the actors’ height. At different times in the play there was a person on the

ladder and another person on the floor looking up. The small base created a diagonal with an acute angle. The ladder was used again to create another diagonal. This time the person on the floor was farther from the ladder so the angle was less acute. Other height-based diagonals included one actor bending over the trunk while the other stood beside them, there was one actor standing while the other sat, actors sitting on things of different heights, actors sitting on the floor while the other stood then sat. The blocking allowed the actors to flow from diagonal to diagonal without ever seeming forced or artificial [done only for a stage picture]. The diagonals were integrated in the use of the floor plan so well that they seem a natural outcome of two people exploring the space. I doubt they were obvious unless you were specifically looking for them. The director's visual composition was effective, and the flow of movement seemed natural.

Lighting:

The flashlights were effective, and surprisingly, provided sufficient lighting so that I never felt that I was losing the actors in the dark. When the ghost light came on, another heart tugging moment for the theater, I was suspicious how dark but well lit the playing space was. I looked up and I realized that yes, there was subtle barely perceptible lighting from the fixtures that was assisting the ghost light in filling the stage. The assistance was so subtle you had to look for it to find it. I think the lighting levels were right and helped with the storytelling.

I found the flashlight shining into the audience a little uncomfortable. Originally, I thought it could have been done less, but on further consideration shining the light on the audience made them a part of the story. In fact, I think, they became an effective stand-in for the ghost actors the script called for.

Costuming:

The costuming did not take away from the storytelling, but I am not sure it helped. It is hard to say how the characters could have been dressed to match the tone of the piece, and give a nod to an undetermined future after a pandemic and what seems like a World War. So, in some ways the actors in contemporary clothing did not tip the hand that we were in a post-apocalyptic future, which I think has value. Yet, it also did nothing to support the idea that we were in a post-apocalyptic future. However, the lighting made a deep scrutiny of the costumes impossible, so I think the costumes served as they needed to serve.

Performance:

It is hard to talk about the performance because there was nothing in the acting that called attention to itself. As an actor and director, I know that casual ease and moving through the space naturally without expressing deep high voltage emotions can be difficult to achieve. Living the ordinary and staying engaged throughout and keeping the audience engaged is difficult. I believe your actors did a wonderful job of staying in the moment of the reality of the play without having any obvious urgency. There was no life or death yet their investment in the present, their physical familiarity, their use of proximity made their friendship believable. The sense of curiosity that they brought to their character, and their ability to play the truth of the moment kept me invested and engaged. I think they did a lovely job of being everyday.

Congratulations Alice on a story well told.

cfrancis blackchild