

LIKE A GOOD WINE, “LASCIVIOUS SOMETHING” AT [INSIDE] THE FORD
PLAYS ON THE SENSES
By M.R. Hunter



Photo Credit: Dawid Jaworski
Alina Phelan and Silas Weir Mitchell in *Lascivious Something*

Sheila Callaghan’s sensually provocative new play, like a fine wine must be inhaled, swished about upon reflection and savored slowly to enjoy all the richness in this full-bodied dramedy. Superficially, it is a story about love and ideals tempered by age. Underneath, however, runs a current of mythological themes, playing on a Dionysian framework set in a burgeoning vineyard on a far off Greek isle where a new wine is being cultivated. The wine will be too sweet, but the story is anything but. The only fault with Callaghan and Circle X’s world premiere is that there is almost too much to be absorbed, but its powerful images linger in memory long after seeing it.

Sibyl Wickersheimer’s sloping sand dune levels, oceanic backdrop, grape-draped trellis and faithfully recreated stucco home of expatriate August (Silas Weir Mitchell) and his expecting wife, Daphne (Olivia Henry), beautifully evokes the solitude before the unexpected tsunami hits. That storm comes in the disguised fury of Liza (Alina Phelan), Augusts’ past lover, a radical from Berkeley who has something she needs to return to him. What that is, to Daphne’s worst fears, is another chance for him to be the man he once was—a life full of fire, passion and conviction. But time has passed some twenty years, and who August is now at the mid-point of his personal crisis may no longer be the man Liza once idolized. It would be an otherwise ordinary love-triangle set in an idyllic paradise if not for the inclusion of an androgynous live-in playmate called only by Boy (Alana Dietze).



Photo Credit Dawid Jaworski
Alina Phelan, Olivia Henry, Alana Dietze
Lascivious Something

While the women openly compete for Augusts' affections, the role of Boy is legitimized by becoming a mouthpiece for a past only Liza knows, she and August share. The shattering, stream-of-consciousness monologue Dietze delivers in a clipped monotone best displays Callaghan's effective hyperrealism with dialogue that digs at the truth from within our thoughts. The cast as a whole is top-notch with excellent turns and subtle nuances throughout. Phelan's forceful presence and later, naked vulnerability is the perfect rival against the exquisitely cunning masterfully shaded by Henry so that one has to wonder if she is a victim or a conniving manipulator. Mitchell finds the right balance between both sides of his character, angry but resolved to his station in life, frenetic, yet absurdly mellow in his trial of temptation.

There is not a single misstep here and no one character fits conveniently into a singularly good or bad role. Much like the archetypes on which these characters are loosely based, they are glorious and contemptible, villains and heroes to each other and to the stories their lives have meted out.

These elements alone make it worthwhile to see this play along with Paul Willis' impeccable and savage direction, but Callaghan takes an even further interesting risk with mixed but laudable results. Throughout, certain scenes are played out that reveal the subconscious fears and desires of those involved, only to be done again in a more believable but deceptive civility. This clever literary device shocks, disarms, produces a few laughs, but occasionally distracts from the flow. It is an ingeniously fresh form of writing, enabling the audience to literally hear and see beyond mere appearances. Whether this works or not is debatable, but the attempt makes me say it does.

The startling effect this has the first time catches one completely off-guard, but with each of its reoccurrences, the novelty wears off. The preceding rumbling, much like the sound before an earthquake, to these scenes is the tip-off for the fantastic, otherworldly dual universe that exists and we are about to witness as an intangible fabric in the world of this play. Kudos to John Zalewski's sound design—with the thunderous accompaniment set to these groundbreaking scenes of imagined nightmares and darkly disturbing fantasies.



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Aina Phelan, Olivia Henry, Silas Weir Mitchell
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The blend of realism and fantasy without a firm foundation of either does present some problems as the shifting perspectives loses ground and one is uncertain as to its direct or indirect meaning. The tragic elements are more Apollonian in nature and the worst of these is the discovery of a life August never knew and will never have a chance to. Mainly, it is the change August, the hero/anti-hero undergoes that equates this as a tragedy, as he tells Liza he will never be the same again. His life is marred now by the knowledge that he thought he had escaped, (ala shades of Oedipus), and his choices have orchestrated a series of unhappy events with fateful conclusions and ill-fated clarity. On an island, in the solace of his vineyard, August has been touched and the visible scar on his thigh is nothing compared to the scars across his soul.

Legend plays a significant role, but not quite realized. The

characters headline one storyline as “Legend One” and subsequent chapters, interrupting the natural state of affairs with overtones of mystery and virtuous suffering. One particularly moving monologue about lovers caught in a vineyard, their blood spilled on the soil from which the grapes take in their inflamed passion and give the limited, fabled wine a sort of mythic transfiguration lends a delicious ambiance but doesn’t fully connect later in the story. The play almost suffers and drowns from too much symbolism and reference, making it difficult to fully empathize or feel for the characters.

Set during the time of Reagan’s landslide election in 1980, announced by a radio DJ along with the ominous phrase, “Things often burst,” Callaghan mightily seems to be making a point but it is lost in the clashing and strategizing action of the three lovers. August typifies the end of the radical revolution Liza fervently still believes in, using this timeline Callaghan may be suggesting the real tragedy is yet to come, somewhere out on the horizon, a prognosticative of the future where not only August, but everyone will never be the same again. Between the wine, the Greek archetypes, the relationships, the bubbling sexuality, the replayed scenes, throwing in a political statement strains the spine of the play and feels like sitting on an overstuffed suitcase that just won’t close. Take me somewhere anywhere, but Callaghan takes me everywhere. With all the talk of wine, by the play’s end you’ll definitely need to uncork a bottle just to unwind.

Nevertheless, this is a brave, new work by an exciting writer and a show that should not be missed unless you’re a priggish teetotaler or have a heart

condition. Be advised there is full frontal nudity and it is not brief. Given the painstaking detail that went into this period piece and Liza's hippie/tomboyish character, a recommendation is in order: Phelan needs to throw away her razor for the run of this show.

Gorgeous lighting by Tom Ontiveros illuminates the rises and the downstage wine cellar hauntingly, and Dianne K. Graebner's costumes, especially the stunning purple dress, fit the personality of each character perfectly.

This play has a broad audience, fans of the hit film, "Sideways," lovers of Greek theatre and mythology, or those who are just passionate about pioneering new works. It is safe to say this play will be the toast of the town here and in its New York production.

-- M.R. Hunter

"Lasciviously Something"

Runs through May 1

Thurs, Fri and Sat at 8pm

Sundays at 2 & 7pm

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