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The Late Henry Moss (review)

Allen J. Kuharski

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them when they are old or disabled? Is challenging 153 tons of steel an act of life-affirming subversion or pure self-destruction? These are the questions raised, but never answered, in Wallace's disturbing drama.

In the Aurora Theatre production, Director Oliver deftly employs focused details to bring a past era to life. Jon Retsky's lighting features the recurring motif of shadow puppetry by candlelight, while Jocelyn Leiser's costumes of sepia and faded denim work well with the minimalist set designed by Melpomene Katakalos. Clifford Carruthers's sound design (which incorporates a haunting solo from *Appalachian Journey*) evokes an atmosphere of edginess, although the effects for the death scene seem unnecessarily melodramatic. The actors perform the complex language and fragmented action with clarity and address. Hiatt brings a finely-tuned desperation to the role of the father, while Jessica Powell suggests the humor and sexuality bubbling beneath the mother's flinty exterior. Jack Powell's Beckett-like jailer/father sports an evil grin which hints at the emptiness of an entire generation of clapped-out authority figures. Jennifer Wagner, while clearly not a teenager, is convincing as the bold and charismatic Pace, while Jurco (in his first professional role) is particularly effective in the central role of Dalton. Nevertheless, there are a few missed opportunities.

Perhaps because of the North American tendency to concentrate on psychological motivation over material reality, the visceral sense of hunger and exploitation, so important to this play, often eludes representation. Clothing tends to be ripped apart with cavalier bravado, despite the fact that the *geste* of discarding—a plate, an apple peel, a shirt, or a life—can be seen as an act of desperate resistance in a world of scarcity. Wallace's tale of intense erotic connection between a boy and a girl who scarcely touch, and the cold steel of a train which tears one of them apart, requires a greater sense of the body's wear and tear—the weight of economic and social factors upon the skin.

Finally, Oliver's casting of a young adult in the role of the teenager Pace, while understandable, points up the subtle challenge of Wallace's radical project: if we do not trust (or train) our teenage actors to perform challenging, serious, and complex performance art within the workplace of the theatre, what does this say about our nation's attitude toward young people in general?

These caveats aside, Oliver's production provided a well-delineated indictment of America's failure to provide for its young, as well as suggesting political resonances beyond the question of

inter-generational conflict and the capitalist exploitation of labor. The audience left the performance disquieted but thoughtful, as if the issues warranted more hours of sustained reflection. Without offering utopian visions of a transformed society, *The Trestle at Pope Lick Creek* deals directly with an era of moral bankruptcy and re-affirms the power of the ordinary, engaged participant to connect with some of the most challenging issues of contemporary life.

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THE LATE HENRY MOSS. By Sam Shepard.
Signature Theatre Company, Peter Norton
Space, New York City. 20 October 2001.

The star-crossed New York premiere of Sam Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss* took place immediately in the wake of the September terrorist attacks, which inevitably muted its impact as the first production in the Signature Theatre Company's 2001–02 season. The play initially came to New York under the cloud of the negative critical reception to its world premiere a year earlier under the playwright's own direction at San Francisco's Magic Theatre. At Shepard's insistence, the New York production was directed by Joseph Chaikin, one of the playwright's most significant inspirations and long-time collaborators, a choice that promised a quite different result from its West Coast version.

As in a number of Shepard's earlier works, *The Late Henry Moss* portrays a reunion of two estranged brothers haunted by an absent father and an unresolved common history of domestic violence and familial betrayal. Here, however, the absent father is physically present at the center of the play's world instead of being evoked through exposition or subtext. The play is structured as a séance and an attempted exorcism of the dead father's toxic grip on the brothers' lives. The action is set in Henry's shabby desert house, his final place of personal exile and asylum. Christine Jones's stylized set and Michael Chybowski's lighting together create a striking blue and orange palette that suggests both the extremes of the desert setting and the subtly ritualistic nature of the play's action. Shepard's play of the dead father's emphatic presence and the nuances of the brothers' relationship to each other, in combination with Chaikin's strong cast, complements as well as echoes the playwright's earlier works.

Shepard's Henry Moss is the playwright's downscale answer to Tennessee Williams's Big Daddy in *Cat On A Hot Tin Roof*. While lacking Big Daddy's wealth, Henry Moss rivals him as a free-wheeling and unrelenting wellspring of unvarnished verbal vulgarity, at once infantile, aggressive, obstreperous, and artlessly inventive in his speech. Shepard has captured a certain American monstrosity in Henry, which is made possible in no small part by the playwright's pitch-perfect ear for middle American vernacular. While living a hard-scrapple life in solitude on a military pension in the New Mexico desert, Henry is no less able to contort and poison his children's lives than Williams's southern gothic patriarch. Guy Boyd plays Henry as a kind of trailer park Ubu, both funny and ghastly, his shameless boorishness mixed with self-pity. Boyd's comic grotesque, however, curiously fails to communicate the character's capacity for cruelty and violence, on which the traumatic collective history of the family hinges.

Ethan Hawke effectively plays the demanding role of Ray Moss, the younger son who becomes a kind of detective in the face of the enigmas revealed around his father's death. Arliss Howard

plays the skittish, outwardly conventional, and mysteriously guilty older brother Earl. Hawke's Ray is distrustful and cynical in his pursuit of the truth, while Arliss's Earl wraps himself in mawkish sentimentality and false obsequiousness. Earl and his father swing between self-hatred and contempt for others, as particularly revealed in their dealings with the play's two Chicano characters. Ray has so far been spared the self-hatred, but shares his father and brother's aggressiveness and arrogance even as he strives to stand apart from them. His determined search for the truth both redeems him and demands a chilling ruthlessness when confronted with the pathologies of his father and brother.

If Henry Moss is Shepard's answer to Big Daddy, then his Chicana girlfriend Conchalla Lupina (played by Sheila Tousey, the only holdover from the original San Francisco cast) is the playwright's version of Josie Hogan in O'Neill's *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. Like Josie, Conchalla tacitly performs the function of a shaman preparing the dying for their death, the spiritual opposite of a midwife. In contrast to Josie's tragic initial misreading of James Tyrone, Conchalla immediately recognizes Henry



Ray Moss (Ethan Hawke) and Earl Moss (Arliss Howard) in the Signature Theatre Company's New York production of Sam Shepard's *The Late Henry Moss*, directed by Joseph Chaikin. Photo: Susan Johann.

as soul-dead long before his physical passing and only initiates a relationship with him for this reason. Like Henry's Mexican neighbor Esteban (José Perez), Conchalla takes pity on Moss with the unsentimental attitude of a veterinarian tending a fatally wounded wild animal. Conchalla's dispassionate pity for Henry is concealed by a mask of mocking sexual provocation and reckless impulsiveness—she plays earth mother as well as bitch goddess. While she and Esteban veer dangerously close to ethnic stereotypes, their unforced capacity for compassion even for the neurotic, arrogant and ungrateful men of the Moss family gives them an undeniable humanity and stature in the play. Tousey's performance is supremely confident, and capped with a piercing shriek at the moment of Henry's death that is simultaneously commanding, unearthly, and shattering.

The most unexpected discovery of Chaikin's production, however, is Clark Middleton's performance as Taxi, a cab driver who unwittingly witnesses the last hours of Henry's life. Discovered by Chaikin in his ongoing workshops with disabled actors, Middleton provides a performance as confident and quirky as Tousey's Conchalla. Taxi is an absurd compulsive talker put on a collision course in turn with the bombastic Henry and the laconic Ray, his diminutive body and balding head seemingly bent for life in the shape of a walking question mark. Middleton creates a weirdly perfect counterpoint to the three troubled Mosses: guileless and loquacious, at once cocky and gun-shy, his small-mindedness and petty vices are all paraded shamelessly for the world to see. Middleton clearly relishes his role, creating a bravura clown show of

bankrupt machismo in the presence of the dying Henry and his troubled sons. The casting of Middleton proved Chaikin's most daring and original stroke in the production.

Shepard's play is distinguished by its rigorously anti-sentimental approach to his characters, his brilliant ear for idiomatic American speech, and the elegant economy of his dramatic structure. No less than O'Neill or Williams before him, Shepard here struggles to square his ambition for a heightened theatricalism (via the use of grotesque, mythic archetypes, and ritual) with domestic psychological realism. Chaikin's nuanced direction aptly exploits these elements as much as possible. Shepard's dramaturgy here joins—perhaps unintentionally—the “classical” line of American theatre that he and Chaikin originally rebelled against. While to write characters that can compare to Josie Hogan or Big Daddy is no small feat, there is an undeniable irony that after over thirty years of writing against the psychological realist tradition, Shepard has ended up working within essentially the very same box that defined the American drama by the early 1960s. Shepard's dramatic voice and vision certainly have earned their own distinct position within this tradition. But would the iconoclastic young Shepard recognize himself in the author of *The Late Henry Moss*?

In the words of Shepard's Earl Moss: “I am *nothing* like the old man!”

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