

# Theater: Cherry On Top, But Little Underneath in New Play

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**WHEN WE WERE YOUNG AND UNAFRAID** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*  
**MANHATTAN THEATRE CLUB**

This new play is set at a bed and breakfast on an island off the coast of Seattle in 1972. A mother and her teenage daughter run an underground shelter for battered women, refugees from a legal system that give them few rights and even fewer ways to escape abusive husbands. It's a fascinating milieu with some potent drama on tap and yet throughout the first act I occasionally found myself thinking: sitcom! Ok, not sitcom but a TV comedy of a bold and unconventional sort.

In part, this is because the premise and setting of *When We Were Young And Unafraid* is rich indeed. It may also be because playwright Sarah Treem has a strong track record on television, with *House of Cards* on Netflix and HBO's *In Treatment* among her credits as writer and producer. On the down side, it's because the characters in this drama -- I almost said "show" -- feel like such types. Cherry Jones remains distinct and to a degree a bit opaque as the mother Agnes. But everyone else falls in line: Morgan Saylor is the sassy but loving daughter, Zoe Kazan is the battered woman who shares tips on dating with the teen, Patch Darragh is the nebbishy guest Paul at this B&B who is overwhelmed by the hippies invading his San Francisco, and Cherise Boothe is Hannah the wise-cracking revolutionary on the lookout for a nearby "womyn only" enclave and handy with a wrench. Think Schneider from *One Day At A Time* but with a raised political consciousness and a lot sexier.

This is too flippant a description, but it highlights the problems that bedevils *When We Were Young And Unafraid*, a show that starts strongly, leans to heavily on broad situations and then becomes thoroughly confused as it undermines what little character and plot it has developed.

The fine cast shines best at the beginning. Agnes and her daughter Penny engage in the usual parent-child teasing with an underlaying of love, though savvy theatergoers will surely suspect Penny's repeated requests for her birth certificate (she needs it for a driver's license) is a loaded gun that will go off later. They deal with guests and intruders and go about their lives when suddenly a buzzer announces a new, secret arrival and Agnes rolls back a carpet to reveal a hidden entrance from the basement.

Her home, it turns out, is a way-station for battered women who get little support from the law and must flee for their lives. Through the eyes of the wary and beat-up Mary Anne (Kazan) we see how the system works, how Agnes is firm but sensitive to the skittish survivors who wash up on her doorstep. In the evening's most powerful and memorable scene, Agnes convinces Mary Anne to let this one-time nurse sew up a wound on the woman's face with stitches. They don't have anything to numb the pain, of course. As the lights dim, Agnes is sewing away while daughter Penny holds Mary Anne's face still and distracts the patient with an enigmatic tale of a local legend. It's a haunting moment that clearly echoes many moments that have come before, simply and effectively making clear the quiet and vital work Agnes has been doing for quite a while now. The scene is promising and vivid and the show never matches it again.

That natural and effective work is soon drowned out by far more obvious plot devices. Penny is a super-smart

girl but what she really wants is to go to the prom with the captain of the football team. Mary Anne, who is still recovering from her bruises and obviously still in love with the man who beat her, gives the hapless girl tips: dress up, play dumb, ask lots of questions and touch his arm. Voila! Penny has a prom date. Meanwhile, Mary Anne is courted by the guitar-toting Paul, who has escaped from San Francisco in the hopes of writing some new songs. Barging in every once in a while spouting revolutionary rhetoric is Hannah (Boothe). She does not like Paul, upbraids Mary Anne, takes a shine to Agnes and keeps sneaking in to fix things so she can justify occupying a guest room on the sly.

Though the cast is strong throughout and ably directed by Pam McKinnon, with a strong assist from an excellent set design by Scott Pask that centers us in this world with ease, *When We Were Young And Unafraid* does play at this superficial, laugh-heavy level.

We can also see all too easily where it's headed, even if we don't quite buy it. Paul is a nebbishy push-over, until an awkward kiss turns him into a hateful bastard, spouting out vicious insults to Mary Anne. Since she is so used to being abused, Mary Anne finally reacts to this and offers up sex to him even though Paul makes her skin crawl. (She's truly only turned on by her husband.) Now, mousy men can of course become monsters but Treem certainly didn't convince us that this particular mouse was a monster at heart.

Similarly, we don't question for a second that the dim-witted high school quarterback may not be the ideal date for Penny. And no parent would approve of a boy who encourages their daughter to skip school and run off to a Led Zeppelin concert. But this doesn't equate him with an abusive husband as the show and Agnes so clearly intend. Maybe the jock asked Penny out because she finally spoke to him? Just maybe?

And in the night's most confusing gambit, the emotional climax is clearly intended to be a scene where Agnes insists that Mary Anne spell out to her daughter Penny exactly how this woman had the crap beaten out of her. (It's meant as a pointed lesson in part to make clear why Penny should not be with the jock.) This makes no sense. As the daughter of Agnes and perhaps unwilling partner in a safe house for battered women (unwilling because what teen wants to give up her room and sleep in her mom's bed?), who would ever imagine for a second that Penny hasn't heard countless similar stories in the past? In the beginning of the show, she's consoling a woman with practiced ease as her mother stitches up brutal wounds. How could it be dramatically consistent to later insist this all-too-clued-in teen hear the "truth" about battered women? She surely knows it better than most.

Other details make no sense either, from Agnes's reaction to her daughter's disappearance (why wouldn't she call her friend the sheriff?) to major bombshells that are delivered and then practically ignored. When Mary Anne says Penny ran away because of Agnes it just doesn't ring true: they fought like any parent and child but their relationship seemed essentially loving and strong.

The only thing that does make sense is the growing bond between Agnes and Hannah. That's more to the credit of the innate likability of these two actors than any believable drama on the part of Treem. We learn Agnes was barred from nursing because she performed abortions and we also learn the great love of her life was apparently a woman (though it's unclear if that love was returned as more than friendship). But these are flashcard bits of info, not nuanced development of character. Tellingly, we learn virtually nothing about Hannah. The real heart of Agnes remains a bit unknowable and only the charm and solidity of Jones make her compelling. Still, that's enough to believe that Hannah (played well by the always appealing Boothe of *Milk Like Sugar and Ruined*) would find her compelling too.

Until Treem's play inspires the most unlikely TV comedy since *MASH*, read this recent essay in *Huffington Post* - "[It Could Have Been Worse](#)" by Carol Hartsell. It helped me gain some small insight into a battered person's psychology and is unquestionably worth your time. Despite a fine cast, I cannot say the same for the play.

## THEATER OF 2014