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Freelance writer and raconteur

Posted: March 24, 2011 01:56 PM



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Theater: "The Dream Of The Burning Boy" Almost Catches Fire

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THE DREAM OF THE BURNING BOY ** 1/2 out of ****

Roundabout Black Box Theatre at the Harold and Miriam Steinberg Center for Theatre

The Black Box Theatre admirably meets its mission to mount new plays by emerging writers and directors with *The Dream Of The Burning Boy*. It is, indeed, a new play by the promising writer David West Read, presented simply but with professionalism by director Evan Cabnet and a solid cast that do it justice. See it and you'll be reminded anew of the skill of lead actor Reed Birney and look forward to Read's next show. Getting the chance to see his work performed with such care

should prove invaluable.

The story is a familiar one: a high school student has dropped dead in the hallway and everyone from teachers to his family and friends are struggling with how to react. The boy's sister (Alexandra Soche) resents how all the students make such a show of their mourning (and take full advantage of the days they can skip school and not be in trouble). His girlfriend (Jessica Rothenberg) feels pressured to grieve publicly and regularly, not easy when she apparently fooled around with his best friend (Jake O'Connor). But most interesting of all is his favorite teacher Larry (the always solid Birney), who doesn't seem to be grieving enough at all. Prodding from the school counselor, a former student Larry can't take seriously (played very well by Matt Dellapina), will eventually draw out the revelations we know are coming.

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All the tech elements are solid, such as the sets by Lee Savage. Essentially, a series of bookcases are rearranged repeatedly to reflect a classroom, a library and a counselor's office quite effectively, aided especially by the sound design of Jill BC DuBoff. The cast is strong top to bottom. And while the story feels familiar, it's constructed efficiently and clearly. Unfortunately, it's also constructed a little too neatly.

The teacher is haunted by a recurring memory of his last chat with Dane (Josh Caras), the student who left his classroom and died a moment later in the hallway. The first scene of the show depicts the final moments of the boy's life. And then towards the end of the show, we see that scene again, fully aware that we're watching the teacher's dream. It's an unsettling, effective moment, coming right after an intriguing scene where Dane's sister behaves unexpectedly. These two scenes together raise all sorts of fascinating issues. They make us believe these characters can surprise us and move us by capturing that frustrating sense of regret and missed opportunities that can so unsettle the people left behind when a life is cut short. It was the perfect ending, doing what theater can do better than any other art form.

Unfortunately, the show went on for about another ten minutes. We're given a *Good Will Hunting* scene where the teacher has an emotional breakthrough and is able to begin to heal. It's all too rote and neatly tied up in a bow. If Read can realize his play went on a little too long, that the need to connect the dots and give us some closure is the wrong one, that art should unsettle us, not reassure us, he'll build on this promising work and this fine production and deliver something great the next time around.

THE 2010-2011 THEATER SEASON (ratings on a four star system)

Angels in America revival at Signature *** out of ****

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Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on iTunes. Visit [Michael Giltz at his website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also available for free on iTunes. Link to him on [Netflix](#) and gain access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: Michael Giltz was provided with tickets to the show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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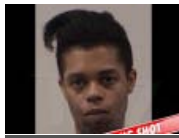
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