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Theater: Horton Foote's Quiet Pleasures in Harrison, TX

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HARRISON, TX: THREE PLAYS BY HORTON FOOTE *** ouf of ****
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Playwright Horton Foote won an Oscar and a Pulitzer, not to mention sustained acclaim for his work in television, film and, of course, on stage. Nonetheless, his

stock will continue to rise, if that's possible. The surefootedness of his writing, the durable combination of vivid characters and subtle but plainspoken dialogue all reward actors who learn to plumb their depths. It's a terrible pity the marvelous staging of *The Orphans' Home Cycle* a few years ago at Signature didn't transfer to Broadway. These three one acts won't make that leap either, but anyone who seeks them out will enjoy the quiet pleasures Foote was so expert at providing.

I wrote just last week about [the unique experience](#) of an evening of one acts and here is a great example. The second play is not terribly interesting and the third has two weak performances. But the evening as a whole is greater than the sum of its parts, thanks to Foote.

The first and most entertaining one act is *Blind Date*. All three are set in the small town of Harrison, Texas, in this case right on the edge of the Depression in 1928. Dolores and Robert are entertaining her sister's daughter and Dolores is just determined to help Sarah Nancy get along in society. She keeps arranging blind dates, but Sarah Nancy (an amusingly grumpy Andrea Lynn Green) won't cooperate. She's a tomboy with no time for nonsense or making small talk whatsoever. Dolores (Hallie Foote) coaches her in appropriate topics for conversation, Robert (Devon Abner) merely wants to wrangle some food out of his wife (he was supposed to eat in town but forgot) and then the boy Felix shows up (the garrulous Evan Jonigkeit who doesn't look remotely like the horrible things Sarah Nancy describes). That's it.

But in that modest little comedy, Foote creates a vivid world. With the right actors, it's a rich play indeed. A lesser actor would have left no impression as the husband Robert, but Abner mines his lines for humor, frustration, sympathy and more, proving how rich this secondary character can be. Jonigkeit has fun as Felix, rattling off the books of the Bible as a stunt, plowing forward to find a topic of conversation even as Sarah Nancy blocks his every approach and letting the sparks fly while leaving room for the surprising finale that hints that these two young people might, in fact, have a future together. Green has a ball as the recalcitrant gal, galumphing up and down the stairs in patient resignation of her fate. And Hallie Foote -- she embodies this world so completely, the second she walks on stage you know this character so

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vividly and well that you trust completely in where the story is going. She's funny without ever going for the laughs, astringent without ever being mean, desperate in the face of a young woman who simply will not make small talk and turns a list of appropriate topics into a very amusing bit of business. You never want her to leave the stage.

The second play, *The One-Armed Man* is the least interesting of the evening. A businessman is confronted by a bitter former employee who lost his arm in an accident at the mill and now comes by once a week, demanding his limb back. Usually, he takes some money and goes off to get drunk. But today, he's brought a gun. The setup is very telling. The businessman, C.W. Rowe (a fine Jeremy Bobb) berates his assistant for being in debt, sort of like an Ebenezer Scrooge who thinks he can impart some wisdom to his employees while nickel and diming them to death. As the harried assistant, Abner (the father in the first play) does a marvelous job of subtle rebellion, letting us know exactly what he's thinking without ever dropping the surface appearance of a lackey. Unfortunately, this piece never finds the right attitude towards the one-armed man McHenry (Alexander Cendese). Is he unhinged? An avenging angel? The guilty conscience of the owner that simply won't go away? Cendese didn't seem to know, so we didn't either. I wouldn't be surprised if a different production of this would be thoroughly gripping. Like Chekhov, Foote is seemingly easy to do but without hitting exactly the right note, the essence of the work is lost.

The last play also has its faults, but the large cast and the general strength of the story keep it afloat. *The Midnight Caller* is about the residents of a boarding house in 1952, all women until a businessman moves in. That's upsetting to the fussbudget Alma Jean Jordan (a very funny Mary Bacon). But the real problems begin when Helen Crews is kicked out of her home and moves in as well. Helen is a scandal to some in town because the handsomest, wealthiest man in Harrison fell for her and she would go off with him on car rides and other jaunts at any hour of the day or night. They were desperately in love, but their mothers kept them apart and she finally gave up while he sank into alcoholism. Now wherever she lives, he comes over three sheets to the wind and bellows out her name until he tires of it and stumbles home.

Bobb is quite good as the businessman who takes a shine to Helen (much to the unspoken frustration of Alma Jean). But it's the women of the boarding house who make this a pleasure. Bacon is marvelous, matched by Green as "Cutie" Spencer, the superior Jayne Houdyshell as a schoolteacher who realizes she has spent her life on the porch watching other people's lives take shape and, of course, Hallie Foote as the proprietor, again so good you can't get enough of her. Unfortunately, Helen and the drunken gentleman caller are played by Jenny Dare Paulin and Cendesne, both of whom are by far the weakest of the bunch. It may simply be a lack of experience with Foote. His lines are simple to memorize but getting them right is an entirely different matter.

Nonetheless, taken as a whole this is a solid entertainment showing the durability and strength of Foote's work. Pam MacKinnon directs with subtlety, the costumes by Kaye Voyce are spot on and the lighting by Tyler Micoleau sensitive to the moment at hand. The set by Marion Williams is functional, though they might have found a more elegant solution to where to place Helen's room in the third play. Still, with limited means and a small stage, it is quickly peopled by the world Foote created. Here's hoping his works keep coming back to New York again and again.

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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Michael Giltz: Theater: [Bring It On Doesn't](#); [Into The Woods](#) Loses Its Way
 The cast includes the great Donna Murphy as the Witch, the talented Denis O'Hare as the Baker and Hollywood's Amy Adams venturing onto the stage as his wife. What could go wrong? Quite a bit actually.

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