



Theater: "The Big Chill" Plus Ghosts Equals Anne Washburn's Latest



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

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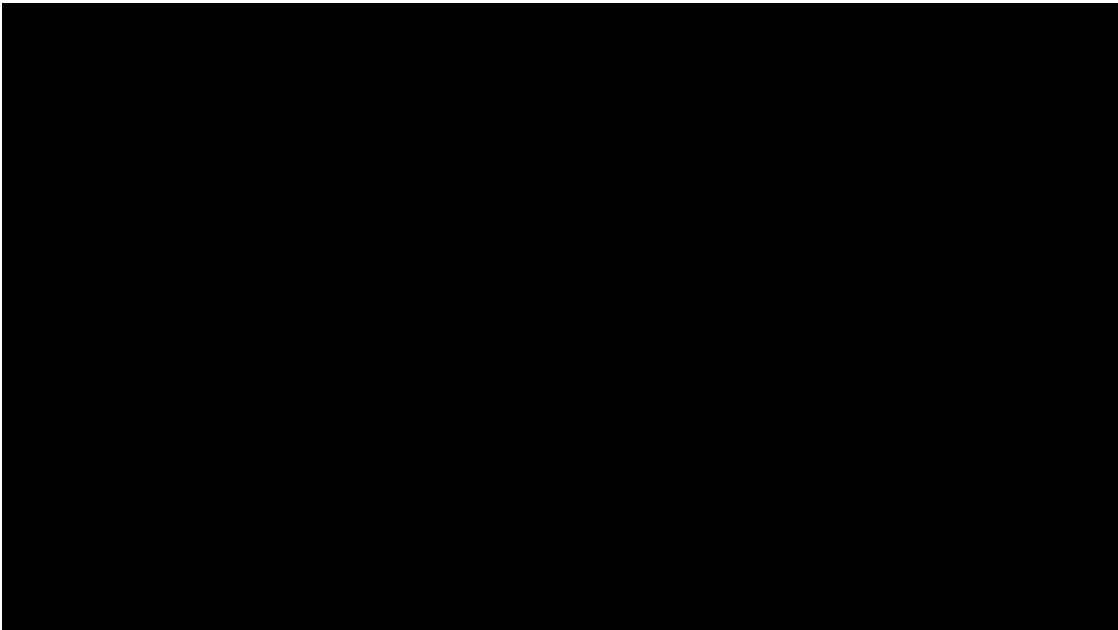
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**ANTLIA PNEUMATICA** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

**PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZON**

I've never attended a terribly exciting funeral, but then I'm the sort of person who also skips high school reunions. Or maybe enough of my friends haven't died yet. In any case, the death of someone bringing the old gang back together is a tried and true formula, from movies like *Return Of The Secaucus Seven* (aka *The Big Chill* before Hollywood stepped in) to this new play by Anne Washburn.

Coming off the rousing success of her post-apocalyptic comedy *Mr. Burns*, you won't be surprised to know that Washburn is not terribly interested in formula. Or rather, a fear of the familiar pushes her to abandon the strong characters and witty dialogue she starts the play with and head off into the stratosphere. Washburn has a lot on her mind, including parenting, the supernatural, childhood and food, lots of food. But she shies away from all that, ending up with a vague monologue about lost passion, the hint of a ghost story and a finale that strives for an open-ended sense of eeriness. The result frustrates more than it intrigues



Nina (a very good Annie Parisse) is preparing for an influx of friends, there to commemorate the death of one of their own. Sure they've drifted apart but this passing should be celebrated. And that means food! She launches into prep work that would make a major restaurant chain proud as others drift in and out. Eventually, we get to know her wry sister Liz (April Mathis); pal Ula (Maria Striar); the amiable Len (Nat DeWolf), who has fun playing with the kids on hand; and old flame Adrian (Rob Campbell), who broke Nina's heart long ago and really, no one can believe he's actually going to show. But show he does.

A late arrival by Bama (an amusing Crystal Finn) offers more welcome humor. But truly the play has all sorts of humor on tap, with every actor given a juicy speech or distinctive banter for them to toss out. Campbell's Nat may be the exception, which is due to the writing, not his performance. Adrian must be the mysterious center of the show and yet a quiet remove doesn't quite get us there. Plus, they refer to his past with Nina in such dire terms I kept thinking it had to be something far darker and more upsetting than merely (?) breaking her heart. Yet perhaps not, since precisely what he did that was so despicable isn't illuminated.

Instead, Adrian is given a rambling, somewhat romantic discourse on constellations, Nina is given a chance to see if she still wants what might have been...and then even this modest moment of actual plot development is undercut by Washburn choosing to muddy up what's going on in unconvincing and an inconsistent manner. (If nothing else, Adrian should certainly decline a sangria when he arrives. Ghost story 101, if you want to keep things uncertain.)

It's rather frustrating to know Washburn could meet the demands of a more traditional play but wouldn't commit. (Maybe she identifies with Adrian too much?) *Antlia Pneumatica* is certainly well acted, well directed by Ken Rus Schmoll and given a handsome production by scenic designer Rachel Hauck.

For a seemingly conventional play, it's also rather bold and interesting in its sound design, thanks to Washburn's writing and its execution by Leah Gelpe. The show begins with Nina offstage talking on a cell phone. We hear her voice though the stage is empty and this is done in a way that -- somehow -- we don't really expect her to appear, giving that entrance a modest little jolt. (Similarly, actors often pop out from offstage in a way designed to keep them hidden until the last possible moment, another admirable detail demonstrating the presentation is in sync with the story.)

Two children in the show are only heard from off-stage, either nearby or talking in scenes that take place separate from the action at hand. This use of sound should be applauded and is a reminder of how little the theater makes use of sound design beyond the expected atmospherics. Yet even here *Antlia Pneumatica* falls a little short: this notable quirk isn't really explored or used in a consistent manner, used first for one effect and later for another and ultimately not adding up to much. Just like, I fear, the show itself.

## **THEATER OF 2016**

*Employee Of The Year* (Under The Radar at Public) \*\*\*

*Germinal* (Under The Radar At Public) \*\*\* 1/2

*Fiddler On The Roof* 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein \*\* 1/2

*Skeleton Crew* \*\*\*

*Noises Off* (2016 Broadway revival) \*\* but \*\*\* if you've never seen it before  
*The Grand Paradise* \*\*\*  
*Our Mother's Brief Affair* \* 1/2  
*Something Rotten* \*\*\*  
*Sense & Sensibility* (Bedlam revival) \*\*\* 1/2  
*Broadway & The Bard* \* 1/2  
*Prodigal Son* \*\*  
*A Bronx Tale: The Musical* \*\*  
*Buried Child* (2016 revival w Ed Harris) \*\*  
*Nice Fish* \*\*\*  
*Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall* \*\*\*  
*Hughie* \*\*  
*Pericles* (w Christian Camargo) \* 1/2  
*Straight* \*\* 1/2  
*Eclipsed* \*\*\*  
*Red Speedo* \*\*\*  
*The Royale* \*\* 1/2  
*Boy* \*\*\*\*  
*The Robber Bridegroom* \*\*\*  
*Hold On To Me, Darling* \*\*\*  
*Blackbird* \*\* 1/2  
*Disaster!* \*  
*The Effect* \*\* 1/2  
*Dry Powder* \*\* 1/2  
*Head Of Passes* \*\* 1/2  
*Broadway By The Year: The 1950s* \*\*\* 1/2  
*The Crucible* (w Ben Wishaw) \*\*\*  
*Bright Star* \*\*  
*She Loves Me* (w Laura Benanti) \*\*\*  
*Antlia Pneumatica* \*\* 1/2

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