

Theater: The Mad Ones Navigate The Straight & Narrow

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THE ESSENTIAL STRAIGHT & NARROW ** 1/2 out of ****
THE NEW OHIO THEATRE

Theater company [The Mad Ones](#) deliver an intriguing, well-acted new play that confirms that if they're crazy, it's crazy like a fox. Most of the play is set in a blandly depressing hotel room in the 1970s (I think). Slowly we suss out that a group of country artists have been stranded in a small town (broken axle) and have several days to kill before they can get back on the road. They meet kooky local inhabitants, throw a party, watch movies on TV, rehearse and most of all gingerly try and come to an understanding between the band members who've remained together and the enigmatic Graham, who has just rejoined the group.

Interspersed with this often amusing, always convincing drama (with a twang) are scenes of an actress rehearsing dialogue and blocking for a scene in some sort of lame movie or tepid 70s TV cop show. She practices picking up and slamming down the phone, gasping in aroused delight, posing on the bed while reciting dialogue and so on. Stephanie Wright Thompson plays both the singer in the country band and this actress and for no discernible reason, it remains basically a mystery for almost the entire show whether this is the same person later in life or some alternate tale.

[The Essential Straight & Narrow](#) from [The Mad Ones](#) on [Vimeo](#).

It's telling that there's no writing credit. The show was "created by the Mad Ones in collaboration with the ensemble." That may be why [The Essential Straight & Narrow](#) has a clutch of great characters but a sagging and vague structure. Thompson plays Jo the singer and early on she's rehearsing a song with bandmate and peacemaker Paul (Michael Dalto) when Graham (Joe Curnutte) shows up. Typically for this play, we understand that these people have uneasily reunited after a time apart (and that Jo and Graham have unfinished romantic business), but it takes a while to figure out whether it's Jo that has just rejoined or Graham. That's not a small point: who has the power, who came back and why, did the band need the returning performer (whomever it was) more than the performer needed them?

Eventually, we know that Graham was the one that split away from the group. Why he split with Jo is less clear. Despite living in LA, she doesn't seem more pop-oriented or career-focused or interested more in success than artistry or any of the other various reasons people in an act might go their separate ways. Clearly they both care for each other and clearly they are both still available. So the main drama of the play -- whether they'll get back together -- is muddled. We can barely figure out why they broke up, much less whether we want them back together. The reasons they remain so far apart despite both of them showing vulnerability simply remains opaque.

Luckily, there's a lot more to enjoy, including the cutting back and forth between this drama and the actress's solo rehearsal of her lines (which Thompson delivers very amusingly). The group dynamic, with Paul constantly acting as a Ringo-like keeper of the peace, is amusing. And best of all is wild card Marc Bovino as hotel denizen Debbie. Debbie is a prostitute but whether she is meant to be a man in drag or transgender or transitioning or just a female character who happens to be played by a man is unclear to me. (Since the bandmates never say a

single word about this, I assume Debbie is a woman.)

It really doesn't matter because Bovino steals the show with a hilarious, delightful turn that lights up the room whenever Debbie appears. Whether she's searching for her lost puppy, handing out markers and paper plates for a crafts project or telling ghost stories, Debbie is vividly real. Frustrated over losing at a party game, blithely bringing over a shady group of friends for a raucous party, flirting with every man in sight, Debbie is a New Age hoot. (Tarot cards and Ouija boards were surely in the mix at one point with this gal.) Tellingly, even Debbie is stranded by the lack of structure in the show, sent off towards the end on a dour and uninteresting note.

Director Lila Neugebauer has fun with the party scene and delineates the action between the two time frames neatly. But she and dramaturg Sarah Lunnie needed to take a much stronger hand with the storyline. Surreal touches add nothing and the big confusion of how the two alternate realities are linked is merely indicative of deeper confusion. A simple line or two would quickly establish who had rejoined the band, making that murkiness unnecessary. More serious overhauling is needed to figure out what the two romantic leads mean to each other and to us.

The set by Laura Jellinek is effective and the costumes by Asta Hostetter are fun without being jokey (always a temptation with the 70s). For all my complaints, it's telling that the final moment does have an emotional kick to it -- [The Mad Ones](#) remain an ensemble to watch. And I already miss Debbie.

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