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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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Theater: Zoe Kazan Pens Play; *Glee's* Groff Gets Ugly

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WE LIVE HERE ** out of ****
CITY CENTER

A common rookie mistake in playwriting is to leave your audience in the dark. Some plays are about plumbing a mystery, of course. But when everyone on stage knows the painful secret yet simply avoids for pages and pages spelling out exactly what is going on, it's merely frustrating.

That's the case in actress Zoe Kazan's new play *We Live Here*. We know sadness looms over the home of Maggie (a soft-voiced Amy Irving) and Lawrence (the always dependable Mark Blum). Althea (Jessica Collins) is

getting married to Sandy (Jeremy Shamos) but a quiet tenseness is present whenever her dead twin sister is mentioned. Suicide is the obvious possibility and eventually we realize that's exactly what happened. When kid sister Dinah (Betty Gilpin) unexpectedly shows up with a date, it's the family friend and dead sister's one-time romantic partner Daniel (Oscar Isaac). Bride to be Althea promptly faints in shock. She later claims it's just because she was happy to see him, but it doesn't take a rocket scientist to realize they have a past.

It takes a long time to reveal that past to us and of course it revolves around the death of Althea's twin sister. Until then we spend most of the play watching characters dance around a topic they don't or can't or won't discuss. The result is not cathartic. Perhaps if the motives of characters were better defined. Dinah might be desperate to wake her family up out of their self-imposed silence. Or she might just like Daniel. He might be obsessed with this family which has dominated his life -- there's a confusing

reference to the parents sheltering him when he needed it as a kid, though it's unclear exactly what he's talking about. Is he seducing Dinah just to get back into their lives? Exactly how manipulative or twisted is he? By the evidence, not very much (though the guy clearly has issues). And Althea is weighed down by guilt, but her anger is so diffuse it doesn't drive her in interesting or revealing ways. She just lashes out.

The revelations toward the end are not terribly earth-shaking (and the ante could easily have been upped). A moment of connection at the end is so modest that the audience was actually confused as to whether the play was over or not. They sat in confusion until the actors started walking on stage to take their bows and hurriedly began to clap. A clearer example of a play not having focus or knowing where it's headed is hard to imagine.

Kazan also throws in some quirkiness -- such as the flirtatious talk between the engaged couple that involves hopping around like a bunny rabbit -- that's so out of left field and uninspired it is quickly forgotten. By and large this is a very traditional play. Scene to scene it's rather confident and the characters though ill-defined have some good lines and notable details. Irving didn't project well the night I saw it but in this small space it doesn't matter. She gives her all to a breakdown scene, though it can't help feeling forced because the play hasn't really earned it. As her husband, Blum is notably centered and believable. He has a monologue that draws on Greek myth to make some indistinct point about their dead daughter and manages to deliver it with such compassion you almost feel it means something.

Collins can't quite make sense of Althea while Gilpin is on stronger ground as Dinah. The two men in their lives are perhaps the best characters since they carry the least weight. Shamos is good as the understanding fiancé who takes everything in his stride (well, almost everything) and Isaac is good as Daniel (oddly, even more effective in a flashback; don't ask me why).

Director Sam Gold has done what he can with a rather shapeless work. But the set by John Lee Beatty is a marvel. It's so detailed and convincing and complete you have no problem believing they live here, as the title states. You get the lay of the land immediately. The living room and study are up front, with the front door on the left, a staircase in the middle leading to the second floor and a kitchen in the back. It's all visible and nicely lived in. You immediately know where you are and the world these people inhabit. It's all presented in a glance so you can get your bearings and then explore it more intimately as time passes, confident in the world he's created. A playwright could learn a lot from a set like that.

THE SUBMISSION ** out of ****

MCC THEATER AT LUCILLE LORTEL

This comic drama by Jeff Tallbott begins with a strong premise and becomes decreasingly less interesting as it goes along.

Jonathan Groff is Danny, a struggling playwright who thinks, who believes -- no, he *knows* that he's just had a creative breakthrough by writing a play about a black woman and her street-wise son who yearn to break free of the project. Unfortunately, Danny is very white and very gay and believes no one will take his play seriously or even think he has the "right" to tell such a story. So he comes up with the African-ish sounding name of Shaleeha G'ntamobi to serve as a pseudonym and sends it out.

When the play is unexpectedly snapped up by a major festival and gets a full production, Danny convinces struggling actress Emilie (Rutina Wesley) to serve as his front. She will be the face of the play until opening night when all will be revealed. It could blow up in their faces of course, but Emilie likes the play so much she agrees (receiving 25% of any future royalties doesn't hurt either).

It's an amusing, intriguing premise rife with comic and dramatic possibilities that *The Submission* mostly squanders. How exactly did Danny get insight into that world, those characters? He doesn't really know, he insists, and Groff is charming as he insists -- annoyingly -- that the play wrote itself after he was inspired by an incident on the subway.

But it isn't long before racial issues boil to the surface in the back and forth between Danny and Emilie (and his boyfriend played by Eddie Kaye Thomas and best pal played by Will Rogers). An early exchange when Danny refers to a "Blony," as in a Tony won by a black actor raises some hackles for Emilie. But soon and for the rest of the play Danny is almost incapable of discussing his play or race in general without immediately devolving into insulting phrases like "you people" or calling Emilie a servant or even a slave.

Sometimes it is said intentionally with anger. But time and time again Danny proves utterly unaware of his insensitive language that sounds more like a white Southerner in the 1960s than a young savvy gay

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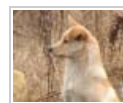
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man in New York City today. Do people reveal their biases unconsciously? Of course they do. But would Danny do so in such a blunt and obvious way? He's supposed to be a playwright, a person skilled with words and acutely aware of their impact. Danny is also apparently so empathetic and talented that he's written a play about a black woman and her son so moving and real that everyone, literally everyone, believes it to be a major work of art. So the idea that this particular man with this accomplishment could be so clueless as to repeatedly say Archie Bunker-like phrases like "you people" is utterly unconvincing. Playwright Talbott needed to work a lot harder and with a lot more subtlety than he does here to make this premise work. Some people in America surely consider ethnic food as daring and American cuisine as "normal," but a young gay man working in the theater and living in NYC? It just doesn't ring true.

Even more absurd is when Danny complains that tokenism means black playwrights with inferior works are mounted and praised while he can't get arrested with his shows. Really? A gay white man saying his world isn't represented in the theater? You don't even have to bother listing all the gay-themed shows and talented gay playwrights with major, major success in the theater to realize how ludicrous this sounds.

At the very least, Danny might have been straight and had a less risible argument. And of course he and Emilie could then have found themselves attracted to each other, raising the stakes immediately. As for ownership of a story, that could have been carried much further and more humorously if Emilie had started rewriting or suggesting new business a lot more aggressively that the people mounting the show embraced while Danny was on the sidelines, powerless.

The most heated argument centers on a scene in the play Danny wrote that revolves around the copious use of the "n" word. You know where the show is headed with this since Danny and Emilie fight more bitterly at every stage. But when she tells him the world-class director helming his work and the famous producer overseeing it all believe the use of the word dozens of times in that one scene is off-putting and should be toned down, Danny reacts with righteous anger about how it's authentic and real and must remain or the entire work is devalued. You keep waiting for it, but bizarrely Emilie -- who argues the point vociferously -- never states the obvious: if the director and producer were talking to a gay white boy about toning down the language in his play, Danny might be right to think there was a double standard. But they believe they're telling a smart and talented black woman whose play they love that the word shouldn't be used so many times. So the context is radically different and therefore his argument is hollow.

The finale is even less convincing with Danny perhaps finally realizing what a clueless schmuck he's been (not to mention a boring date with dull tastes). I've barely mentioned Rogers and Thomas, both fine actors with very poorly defined characters that have almost nothing to do. The show could easily -- indeed should -- be a two character drama to tighten the focus. Groff is always appealing on stage despite Danny's inconsistency and he's not afraid to make Danny unlikable. The attractive Wesley handles the best role with aplomb and intelligence, though she can't make Emilie's confused monologue about ownership of a story turn into sense any more than the playwright did.

Walter Bobbie directs smoothly though he and the producers should have sent Talbott back to the drawing board since his work has a great deal of unfulfilled promise and he clearly has the talent to deliver it, if pushed further. The scenic design by David Zinn uses revolving panels to smoothly and quickly change scenes from a coffee house to an apartment to a hotel room. It's a model of efficiency and makes excellent use of the Lucille Lortel's small space.

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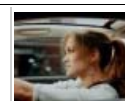
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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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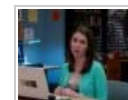


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