of a self-centered man who puts himself before his own family. Director Terese Hayden finds every nuance in portraying the strained bonds between the family members and keeps the action flowing smoothly.

Despite a threadbare set and simplistic lighting, the cast is exceptional. James Stevenson gives a tour de force performance as the frustrating father who is slowly losing his grip on reality. The actor mixes comic bravado with pent-up rage to give the character depth and dimension. Jacqueline Brookes complements him well as his faithful, ever-forgiving wife. Charles D. Cissel successfully underplays the role of the dutiful son, rarely letting his emotions get out of control. Jill Van Note comes on strong in the second half as the estranged daughter who returns for a family funeral. The supporting players are all first-rate, including Derrick Lemont Sanders, Elizabeth Nafpaktitis, Roger Kovary, Richard Lollo, Roberta MacVor, and Rod Bladel.

The Train Play

Reviewed by Kari Levet

Presented by Clubbed Thumb at The OHO Theater, 66 Wooster St., NYC, Jan. 13-Feb. 2.

Liz Duffy Adams' new play presents some very strange strangers on a train. Firstly, there's Gabriel (Austin Jones), an Irishman who is fleeing predatory angels that he says keep nibbling him; Leopard Girl (Ami Shukla), a schoolgirl seeking comic book-style superpowers; a young scientist (Quincy Tyler Bernstine) who knows all about Time but is actually looking for a good one; Paul (Keith Davis), a travel writer fired of racing; Gaia (Maria Porter), a jaded earth goddess currently posing as a fur-wearing Britisher and advocating destruction; and three Russian brothers, Mikhail (Mark Leydorf), Sergei (Gibson Frazier), and the poetic youngest, Dmitri (Ryan Shogren), all on a mission of peace within the United States. The train's conductor (Dan Sturges) exists only as a disembodied voice, a contemporary—and very dissatisfied—Amtrak employee. The engine is probably hurting towards infinity, so this train of thought becomes a meditation on Time viewed from several skewed human angles. The play, while being driven by some intriguing imagination, is also forced to carry a lot of self-conscious, metaphorical baggage.

Paul says to Leopard Girl, "Stop trying to impress me with your vocabulary," and this piece of advice could prove useful to the playwright. While there's an obvious love of language and an ambitious imagination at work here, it has to be noted that once we get to know these eccentric passengers, a kind of creative exhaustion sets in. What follows are some unlikely couplings, but this interaction seems totally random and adds little to understanding the journey. The odd bits of reality—singing, alcohol, sex—become strangely alive amid the fog of metaphor. Oh, and it seems Irony and Humor missed the train.

On David Morris' splendid arc of a set, Jonathan Silverstein has crisply directed a superior cast. Bernstine, always suggesting comedic mischief, stands out, adding a dimension missing elsewhere from the play.
The Train Play

A CurtainUp Review

The Train Play

Dave Lohrey

Am I leaving the station, or is the station leaving me?

--- The Scientist

L-R: Mark Leydorf, Ryan Shogren & Gibson Frazier (Photo: Amanda AlIk)

It isn't easy to like a story that doesn't go anywhere. We post-moderns don't want to admit it, but there's something necessary about the old beginning, middle, and end. The Greeks saw it that way, and as everybody knows, they knew just about everything. What they forgot to mention, however, is that the beginning of one play can be more interesting than the whole of another, so in the end one must forgive lapses in form, and vote for whatever works. The Train Play requires a lot of forgiveness, but in the end it provides one hell of a ride.

http://www.curtainup.com/trainplay.html
Since there isn't much of a story - as you might have guessed from the title - one has to look elsewhere for drama. I found it staring at me from the moment I entered the auditorium at the Ohio Theater. The set, designed by David Morris, immediately establishes the mood (playful) and establishes the setting (everywhere/nowhere), while representing familiar imaginary territory, somewhere in George Jetsonland, circa infinity. Creating a great sweeping crescent, the "train" consists of a raised platform on which sit eight sturdy passenger benches. Above hangs a curved ceiling. The entire affair is painted metallic silver and looks vaguely space aged.

The title - so inadequate, so devoid of meaning, so - perfect. But can you imagine Tennessee Williams calling his masterpiece, The Streetcar Play? Ms Adams, therefore, should be commended for offering a title that promises so little. This play could - and perhaps should? - be a monologue played by one actor as a standup routine. Playwright Adams only has only one voice to offer. Her effort to divide it among several characters works only to a certain extent. It is that voice of learning we hear often and have heard now for some thirty years, consisting of American New Age blather, Marxist disgruntlement, and hetero/homosexual fantasy. It could be called politically correct pornographic musings. Mind you, Adams makes the most of it.

Each passenger enters alone, sits, and begins to speak. None has anything to say, but there is much said. In fact, from the opening words of The Voice (Dan Sturges), who is a kind of hysterical unseen train conductor ("Fuck you all, we'll get there when we get there."), we get the sense that what is said has no grounding in reality. A fleeing Irishman by the name of Gabriel Anglefood (Austin Jones) takes the first bench and begins his equally distressed and distressing rant ("There will only be safety in a transformed universe.") Then comes an erudite Afro-American travel writer (Keith Davis), who is capable of wit ("I'm not a pedophile. If I were, I'd like nice children"). This he says to his young neighbor, Leopard-Girl (Ami Shukla), an energized lunatic who has the power to stop time and to make herself invisible. She also affects a marvelous pout ("I can't find my secret power."). The train is then eventually filled with five more passengers: two women
and three Russian tourists ("Wherever we go, there we are.")

The train chugs along. Things begin to pick up, though, when the soloists begin to move about the cabin, finding new configurations in their isolation. Jonathan Silverstein, by the way, directs with flair and confidence. None of the temporary entanglements is entirely obvious. The embittered travel writer mixes it up with the jaded goddess, Gala (Marla Porter), creating in the process a rather charming befuddlement. Dmitri (Ryan Shogren), the youngest of the three Russians has his eye on the fleeing Irishman, and winds up throwing the audience a curve. Most effective and amusing is the Scientist's flirtation with the remaining Russians, Mikhail (Mark Leydorf) and Sergei (Gibson Frazier). The simulated sex scene that ensues is the most persuasive moment in the play, because here the audience finally gets its face rubbed in a little reality. In fact, the play - if it can ever be called a play - really begins when the passengers couple up. The writing improves, the actors finally have something to do, and the tiresome incantations become opportunities for witty exchange.

The acting is uneven. Austin Jones makes a most compelling little Irishman, while Marla Porter never quite seems as English as she would have us believe. Mark Leydorf and Gibson Frazier play an amusing Russian pair, but their little brother seems much more like an American from Dayton, Ohio. Keith Davis is adequate, but never quite comes into his own. This could be said of Quincy Tyler Bernstine as the Scientist, were it not for her virtuoso orgasm, which brings the house down. Ami Shukla, most compelling of the ensemble, creates a character who, although difficult to get a handle on, nonetheless, consistently grabs one's attention.

Now just where the hell is this train headed? I don't want to give it away. But wherever it is, lighting designer David Zeffren creates something as magical as Oz and as breathtaking as the Grand Canyon. Head for the Ohio Theater to find out. All aboard.

THE TRAIN PLAY.
Written by Liz Duffy Adams.
Directed by: Jonathan Silverstein

http://www.curtainup.com/trainplay.html
The Train Play

Come on ride the train.

Review by Robert Kant

"Am I leaving the station or is the station leaving me? Am I being railroaded?" ponders an inquisitive scientist in Clubbed Thumb's runaway comedy. Currently playing the Theater, Liz Duffy Adams' 75-minute production is a thought-provoking, playfully absurd journey through time, space and personal relationships.

Revolving around the lives of eight strangers, the aptly named 'Train Play' takes place one night, from dusk to dawn, on a train bound for an undisclosed destination. It's an esoteric trip and the passengers are loaded with baggage.

The first traveler is Gabriel Angelfood. Speaking with a thick Irish brogue, Angelfood (Austin Jones) restlessly scribbles notes in the margins of a bible and mumbles about angels and damnation. Quickly, he's joined by a bubbly 12-year-old girl (Ami Shukla); a strangely inarticulate woman (Quincy Tyler Bernstine); and Paul (Keith Davis), an embittered travel writer.

"All I wish is that I could arrive where I want to arrive, when I want to arrive," says Paul. Fortunately, Adams doesn't make the journey quite that simple. After the train's first stop, the passenger list grows to include an affluent middle-aged goddess (Maria Porter) and a trio of vodka-loving, Russian brothers (Mark Leydorf, Gibson Frazier and Ryan Shogren).

Delivering intertwined, internalized monologues, each character reveals his or her secrets: The inarticulate woman is a wildly intelligent scientist; the 12-year-old girl is Leopard Girl, a superhero with the power to stop time; Dimitri, the youngest brother, is gay; and so forth. Oddly, Adams chooses to keep many of her colorful characters' secrets to herself. The lack of full-disclosure is frustrating, but it is also part of the play's overall charm. Although the script has a few flaws, the playwright shows enormous promise, marking herself as an author-to-watch along with the likes of Melissa James Gibson ( ), Stephen Belber ( ) and Christopher Shinn ( "Four").

Directed by Jonathan Silverstein and well-performed on David Morris' impressive set, 'The Train Play' starts slowly, but quickly builds steam as the characters move about the train and interact with each other. "I am an idealist. I fail in love quickly," admits Dimitri as he attempts to connect with Gabriel. The young Russian character isn't the only passenger who "falls in love quickly." Throughout the comedy, several characters hook up to share drinks, swap stories and even fornicate. As the stories mix, 'The Train Play' takes on a pleasant, Robert Altman-esque style: imagine 'Short Cuts' set on the Orient Express.

In its final moments, the intermissionless production makes a stop at 'The Twilight Zone.' After spending a life-changing night together, the characters arrive at a destination that -- to the delight of the adolescent superhero -- "has 'not-yet-conquered' written all over it." The final image, like most of 'The Train Play' itself is clever, optimistic and just a little bit disturbing.

RED MENACE Mystery and disease stalk the world in this Poe-inspired comedy.

Red Death

In Edgar Allan Poe's *The Masque of the Red Death* (1842), Prince Prospero and a thousand nobles barricade themselves in an abbey to elude the pestilential Red Death that "had long devastated the country." For many months, the knights and dames live in sybaritic seclusion until, at a masquerade ball, the titular figure appears and destroys all. (Incidentally, the Red Death was something like the Ebola virus, a highly contagious virus that causes the stricken to expel blood from all orifices.)

Lisa D'Amour's *Red Death* provides a coy update of Poe's virulent vignette, but isn't likely to devastate any large segment of the population. The mainstage production of this year's Clubbed Thumb Summerworks Festival, D'Amour's seven-scene chiller centers on a former lifeguard named Jane Withers (Maria Striar) and her curious pursuit of a prince of industry named Prosper Albright (John McArd). Charged by a cached cadre known only as the panel, Jane searches "for the origin of evil, the root of denial and the basic human weakness that causes us to fear death."

To its credit, Clubbed Thumb tends to choose plays that offer meaty roles for women, and *Red Death* proves no exception. Jane is a fascinating, infuriating, unadulterated character, and Striar—no doubt assisted by director Anne Kauffman—happily concentrates more on what makes her compelling than what might make her sympathetic. The cast on the whole does fine work, especially Mary Shultz as Albright's soused spouse and Robert Alexander Owens as a timid detective. Also a treat is the lighting design by John-Paul Szczepanski, whose colored fluorescent make fine use of the Ohio's awkward column-strewn space.

Would that Szczepanski could lend a little of his talent for illumination to D'Amour's script. While she's able to write singular characters and vivid dialogue, the play proves unnecessarily obscure. She cleverly reconfigures Poe without coming up with an adequate (or really any analogue to his plague; we get an allusion to a vast conspiracy, yet no real enemy is presented. An existential thriller is possible, but it should at least have its system of metaphysics targeted, and D'Amour's attempt seems scattershot—too much of the plot seems merely incidental. Thanks to Kauffman's confident direction and the efforts of the cast, *Red Death* is far from sickly, but with a more carefully crafted structure and nemesis it could really have been infectious.—Alexis Soloski
The 2001 Obie Award-winning Clubbed Thumb theater company kicks off its seventh annual summer festival (a little early this year) with Lisa D'Amour's Red Death, directed by the able Anne Kaufman. Maria Striar (who doubles as Clubbed Thumb's co-artistic director with Meg McCary) stars as Jane Withers, a woman on a mission to track down the mysterious Prospero Albright. "Her real mission is to find the origins of evil," Striar reveals, "the root of denial and the basic human weakness that causes us to fear death. It feels like a film noir. It has elements like the obsessiveness in relationships between people, which wobbles between love and hate, and the desire to kill." The cast of six includes John McAdams as Albright, and the magnificent Mary Schultz as his wife. Red Death, Ohio Theater, 66 Wooster St., (212) 206-1515. May 3-25. Fri.-Sun., 8 p.m. (plus 3 added performances: Mon. May 20, Weds. May 22 & Thurs. May 23, 8 p.m. $15.

TOM MURRIN

For more scintillating subjects, see PAPERMAG's Paperclips Archive.
Poe's 'Masque' Develops 21st Century Implications in Red Death

Clubbed Thumb, Inc.

In Edgar Allan Poe's "Masque of the Red Death," a prince, seeking to protect himself from a plague that ravishes the countryside, locks himself and 1,000 of courtiers inside a castle, hoping to seal out death. One night, the prince and his followers learn that there is no escaping death, when the plague intrudes suddenly and silently on a fantastical masked ball.

Playwright Lisa D'Amour has taken Poe’s cautionary tale and transformed it into a modern parable, Red Death. In this interesting and occasionally engaging piece, Poe’s ‘plague’ has been replaced by The Panel, a mysterious law enforcement or morality agency, from which all of the play’s characters seem to be running. For those audiences familiar with ‘Masque’, they will notice that John-Paul Szczepanski’s lighting is the most direct reference to the short story. Szczepanski colors each scene with one primary color just as each room in the prince’s suite is dominated by one color that floods through stained glass windows in the original work.

Red Death unfolds as a kind a detective story told in flashback, revealing the inner workings of The Panel and its frightening power. At the play’s onset, Jane Withers is being questioned by a detective on behalf of The Panel. She is accused of many crimes, including murder and arson. The interrogation takes on a comedic tone as the interviewee turns the tables on the detective conducting the examination. She can do so because she was once an employee of The Panel herself. In fact, as the audience learns during the course of Red Death, all of the crimes of which she stands accused were committed in the process of stalking her target on behalf of The Panel.

The Panel’s fearsome power lies in its ability to match its agents with its quarries. The game that unfolds between pursuer and pursued in Red Death can be tantalizing. Concurrently, it can be frustrating for the audience as D’Amour purposefully holds back information or provides contradictory details.

These details can bog down a production that doesn’t crackle as much as it should. D’Amour’s dialogue borrows heavily from jaundiced B-movies in which quick and abrupt delivery is at a premium. Director Anne Kauffman coaxes appropriate performances out of the players, most notably Mary Shultz as the bored and somewhat dizzy wife to Jane’s target. As the wife sits in a beach lounge chair with vodka-laced iced tea at her side, Shultz can make a remark such as "Have you ever watched someone die in the rip-tide?" seem ominous, casual, and delightfully quirky all at the same time. Her fellow performers, notably Maria Striar as Jane and John McAdams as the man Jane is pursuing, manage to achieve this delicate balance intermittently but do not share Shultz’ felicity with the language or the style.

Red Death, ultimately, is an interesting homage to Poe’s story. The Panel, in a world where individual privacy is always a question, is an apt extension for the 21st century of the plague that Poe’s prince seeks to avoid. One wishes that the urgency with which Jane and others are running from The Panel was more clearly brought to the fore in this production.

Red Death plays at the Ohio Theater (66 Wooster Street) through May 25. Tickets are $15.00 and may be purchased by calling 212-206-1515. Further information is available online at www.ClubbedThumb.org.

-- Andy Propst
ILL-WILL HUNTING
by Alisa Solomon

Jane is searching for the origin of evil, the root of denial, and the basic human weakness that causes us to fear death. That, at least, is how the plucky protagonist in Lisa D'Amour's "thriller in seven scenes" describes her mission as she carries out the commands of a mysterious "panel." Her specific goal is to hunt down a childhood friend, Prospero, whose parents committed a double suicide that she and Prospero both witnessed. Jane burns down his Florida beach house, poisons his daughter at a disco in Spain, and stalks him by masquerading as a servant on his yacht somewhere in the Adriatic. Thrown overboard, Prospero's wife ends up paralyzed; Prospero ends up dead. And Jane gets hauled before the unseen panel on charges never quite clear.

Quest stories are big on linear plot, of course, but what makes Red Death crackle for 70 minutes is D'Amour's spare and sinister language, which twists and tangles the traditional narrative line. For the most part, the play is structured as a series of tight dialogues between Jane and those she deceives: her father, a panel detective, Prospero, his wife, and his daughter. Each exchange opens more questions than it answers. "I work for a panel of experts who are engaged in a massive research project," she tells her bewildered father. "We are exploring how to maximize Good in the world. The code word for the project is 'Cup o' Kindness.'"

From the first scene, it's clear enough that Jane lies, so there's nothing reliable about anything she asserts, yet she becomes increasingly likable as the action unfurls. In part, that's because D'Amour stages deeds that contradict what gets said about them, raising doubts about our own reliability as observers, and demonstrating how prejudice can
alter the plain facts of evidence.

Playing Jane, Maria Striar hits just the right level of petulance to make her seem righteous in her pursuit rather than just obnoxious. The cast, in a part production directed by Anne Kauffman, generally avoids the cartoon exaggerations that too often pass for acting in post-mod plays these days. Perhaps the younger actors have taken a cue from downtown treasure Mary Shultz, who plays Prospero's wife, Connie. A 20-year veteran of the avant-garde, Shultz can build depth and texture into a character from the outside in. She puts Connie's ridiculousness right on the surface, but shows currents of complexity rumbling beneath.

As an inspiration, D'Amour claims Edgar Allan Poe's "Masque of the Red Death," in which rich revelers party away at a secluded abbey in a failed attempt to evade the deadly plague gripping their town. D'Amour picks up some images and the ominous tone of Poe's story without borrowing his characters, plot, or baroque prose. Most of all, there's an emotional affinity between the works—a creepy mix of sympathy and repulsion. Poe describes the revelers' costumes as having "much of the beautiful, much of the wanton, much of the bizarre, something of the terrible and not a little of that which might have excited disgust." It would make a good marquee line for D'Amour's cunning play.

The nebby hero of Reading Hebron—Nathan Abramowitz—conducts his own search for the origin of evil, the root of denial, etc. But in Jason Sherman's 1996 quest narrative, the force behind Nathan's effort is all too real: the 1994 massacre of 29 Palestinians praying in a Hebron mosque by Jewish settler Baruch Goldstein. Nathan becomes obsessed with understanding Goldstein's deed: Was it the work of an individual madman, as an Israeli government inquiry found, or did official policies and the acceptability of anti-Arab hatred make the government and the society—and maybe the whole Zionist project—somehow culpable?

Never mind the answers. Especially in ultra-polarized times like today's, such questions alone raise the potent ire of those who insist that Israel can do no wrong. Sherman escapes some of the wrath, perhaps, by making Nathan such a putz. Of course Nathan would think that way: He's a bleeding-heart, North American, assimilated Jew, hawkish detractors would say—and in fact, do, when avid proponents of various views appear from Nathan's imagination to try to win him to their side.

These manic scenes are the play's strongest. In one, Nathan declares that Jews must recognize the humanity of Palestinians, and out of nowhere a singing group of activists comes dancing from the wings to wrap him in a Palestinian flag and throw a kaffiyeh over his head. In others, he engages Noam Chomsky, Edward Said, Cynthia Ozick, and his dead grandfather.

Less richly, the play depicts Nathan as a failed husband and father,
A CurtainUp Review
Red Death

by Les Gutman

In order to find evil, you've got to go there yourself.

---Jane Withers

My first impulse in preparing to see Red Death, Lisa D'Amour's intriguing new play and the centerpiece of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks 2002 series, was to revisit its source "inspiration," Edgar Allan Poe's short story, "The Masque of the Red Death". Poe's is a haunting tale (no big surprise there), long on atmospherics, short on characters and filled with the sort of spooky symbolism that oozes with doom. Ms. D'Amour's work, less about setting and symbols and much more populated, conjures up its own unsettling gestalt.

Red Death is billed as a riff on Poe, but don't expect a mere adaptation of the short story, even in deconstructed form. The play does indeed derive certain markers from the short story (there is a character named Prospero (John McAdams) here, his boat -- which figures prominently in the play -- is called Avatar (from Poe's second line: "Blood was its Avatar...") and toward play's end, those assembled adjourn to a bar called Poe's. But whereas the short story is an allegory about the inevitability of death, an attempt to shun...
Production elements are particularly fine: Alexander Dodge's set incorporates an upstage translucent panel that's particularly effective especially with the scene setting colors of John-Paul Szczepanski's lighting effects. (Color figures prominently in Poe's story, and here as well.) Miranda Hoffman's costumes are excellent, as is Matthew Burton's sound design.

The cast registers convincingly. Maria Striar as Lucinda and although Mary Shultz develops Connie's character nicely, she's the only cast member who seems less than fully prepared (at least the night I saw her). Meghan Love does good work as Jane's father. Megs. Owens and McAdams convey interesting nuances as does Mel Juden as Lucinda and although Mary Shultz develops Connie's character nicely, she's the only cast member who seems less than fully prepared (at least the night I saw her).

Evil in Red Death revolves around the enigmatic "Panel," an extra-legal organization that has cult-like qualities. Jane is a lapsed panel recruit, and as we first meet her she has become the subject of panel inquiry. She's been "interrogated" (Robert Alexander Owens) her following a trail that leads her to Prospero, his wife Connie (Mary Shultz) and daughter Lucinda (Meghan Love). In a series of locales (each identified by projections as diverse as Grass Lake, Michigan; something of an epicenter; Golden Sands, Florida; Barcelona, a chaise ensues. It's a swarm of mysterious suspense, the further details of which are best left to viewing.

Does your ad belong here?
I can't say that *Red Death* is a brilliant work but it is well written and quirkily compelling, with enough inventiveness to produce a solid evening of theater. Who's good, who's bad, what's true and what's false? You may not get all the answers, but you'll leave with a healthy dose of questions that can take you far in many directions -- hopefully not to a small town called Grass Lake (pop. 642 plus or minus a few).

**RED DEATH**
by Lisa D'Amour, inspired by Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death"
Directed by Anne Kauffman

with Robert Alexander Owens, Maria Striar, Mary Shultz, Mel Jurden, Meghan Love and John mCAdams
Set Design: Alexander Dodge
Costume Design: Miranda Hoffman
Lighting Design: John-Paul Szczepanski
Sound Design: Matthew Burton
Running Time: 1 hour, 30 minutes with no intermission
A production Clubbed Thumb
Ohio Theater, 66 Wooster Street (Spring/Broome)
Telephone (212) 206-1515
Clubbed Thumb website: www.clubbedthumb.org
Opening May 5, 2002, closing May 25, 2002
FRI-SUN @8 (additional performances 5/20, 5/22 and 5/23, also @8); $15, $10 for students
Reviewed by Les Gutman based on 5/3/02 performance

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