

THEATER REVIEW

Hire a Vet? Forget That. Adopt One Instead.

'Luther,' by Ethan Lipton, at Here Arts Center



Heather Phelps-Lipton

Luther From left, Bobby Moreno, Gibson Frazier and Kelly Mares are featured in Ethan Lipton's dark satire at Here Arts Center.

By [CATHERINE RAMPELL](#)
Published: June 13, 2012

Can a man who kills other men for money retain his humanity? What if his employer is the United States government?

This question, as it pertains to the psychological and sociological fate of American veterans, is one that the country has never been quite comfortable answering, especially now that [less than 1 percent](#) of Americans serve in the military. [Suicides](#) among active-duty soldiers are at a record high, and only about three-quarters of veterans who served after Sept. 11 [have jobs](#). Disturbing stuff, certainly, but what can disconnected civilians do about it? Slap bumper stickers on our minivans?

“Luther,” running at Here Arts Center as part of the Clubbed Thumb Summerworks 2012 festival, offers a more visceral alternative.

In this wine-dark satire, families adopt veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder to help them make the transition back into civilian life. In this alternate universe the adopted veterans hold a social status that falls between pet and child, while bourgeois “parents” coo over their own generosity toward America’s displaced heroes.

It is a bizarre conceit and a disturbing one. But it’s one that Ethan Lipton’s trenchant script and Ken Rus Schmoll’s pitch-perfect direction deliver masterfully.

Ominous though the play’s premise is, laughs are elicited effortlessly from the most casual of dialogue. Initially the plot appears relatively banal: well meaning, the high-strung parents Marjorie and Walter (Kelly Mares and Gibson Frazier) decide to take Luther — the infantilized veteran who sleeps on their couch — to a company party.

Unfortunately Luther (Bobby Moreno, as a disarmingly guileless killing machine) is not quite ready for prime time. Consequences both hilarious and horrifying ensue.

Most of the play oozes with a moral ambiguity that will stick to your bones and your conscience long after you’ve left the theater. It’s only in the last scene that Mr. Lipton succumbs to that dangerous dramatic temptation toward didacticism, clubbing his audience over the head with a long monologue about free will and the evils of war.

But in an otherwise excellent play that explores how we alternately demonize, deify and finally ignore our wounded warriors, perhaps one misstep is allowed.

“Luther” continues through Sunday at Here Arts Center, 145 Avenue of the Americas, at Dominick Street, South Village; (212) 352-3101, here.org.

A version of this review appeared in print on June 14, 2012, on page C7 of the New York edition with the headline: Hire a Vet? Forget That. Adopt One Instead..

Review: Clubbed Thumb's Luther, part of Summerworks 2012

Playwright Ethan Lipton and director Ken Rus Schmoll score a small-scale (and criminally short-lived) triumph with this tale of an affluent couple that adopts an explosive war veteran.

By Helen Shaw

Time Out Ratings



Photograph: Heather Phelps-Lipton

[HERE](#). By Ethan Lipton. Dir. Ken Rus Schmoll. With ensemble cast. 1hr 20mins. No intermission.

It would be best for everybody if we all pretend this never happened. Please try to ignore the happy crowds outside [HERE](#) and tell yourself that Ethan Lipton's bone-funny comedy *Luther* hasn't just been exquisitely mounted by Clubbed Thumb; Ken Rus Schmoll hasn't just directed another of his Platonically perfect productions; and Gibson Frazier hasn't just developed another of his loveable, photorealistic everyman portraits. It will be easier this way.

It's a sad downtown paradox that a successful short production can actually harm that same show's chances of being mounted, postfestival, elsewhere in town. New-work spaces such as Playwrights Horizons or the Vineyard favor premieres; they sulk when they're not first to the trough. Thus Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks shows can

sometimes break your heart: You'll see something superb (say Anne Washburn's *The Small*), it will appear and disappear in a heartbeat, and you'll spend the rest of your life drunkenly collaring local artistic directors demanding to know why (why?!?) they didn't pick it up to let it run forever. This can be hard on critical dignity.

The secret is, of course, already out on [Ethan Lipton](#)—his musical about layoffs, *No Place to Go*, played a similar flirtatious, comic game with the desperation of modern life. In *Luther*, Lipton imagines a sort of looking-glass New York, a place where people ride horses down at the gentrifying docks, and couple Walter and Marjorie (Frazier and Kelly Mares) can adopt war-scarred veteran Luther (Bobby Moreno) rather than a puppy. One night, they decide to take their volcanic little buddy to a company party, and his encounters with a waiter (Pete Simpson) and an awkward guest (John Ellison Conlee) vault rapidly from funny to explosive.

If you've seen Lipton perform with his jazz combo, you know how loosely he holds a microphone; he has the same light touch as a dialoguist, the same syncopation, the same gentle, noodling flair. Schmoll rolls around in Lipton's delicately shaded scenes like they're clover; his coolheadedness is just the thing to guide us through a satire about matters too sad for tragedy. His designer, Arnulfo Maldonado, has done wonders with a gray carpet and a rolling white door-box, but the set isn't just a quiet aesthetic triumph. Companies interested in coproduction should note: The whole thing seems very, very portable.

Off-Off-Broadway Review

NY Review: 'Luther'

By Jonathan Mandell | Posted June 11, 2012, 6:13 p.m.



Photo Source: Phelps Lipton

More than halfway through the enigmatic "Luther," the second entry in Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks 2012 festival, I thought I finally discovered the solution to the puzzle that is Ethan Lipton's play: "Luther's a dog!" I said to myself. Well, maybe not.

The play begins with promise. Luther (Bobby Moreno) is wrapped in a blanket and sleeping on a couch as Walter (Gibson Frazier) and Marjorie (Kelly Mares) discuss the vacation they are about to take and their need to find somebody to care for him while they are away.

So who is Luther? When we finally get a look at him, we see that he is a grown man, scruffy and oddly childlike. A veteran who was damaged in some way by the war in which he served, he was apparently adopted by Walter and Marjorie.

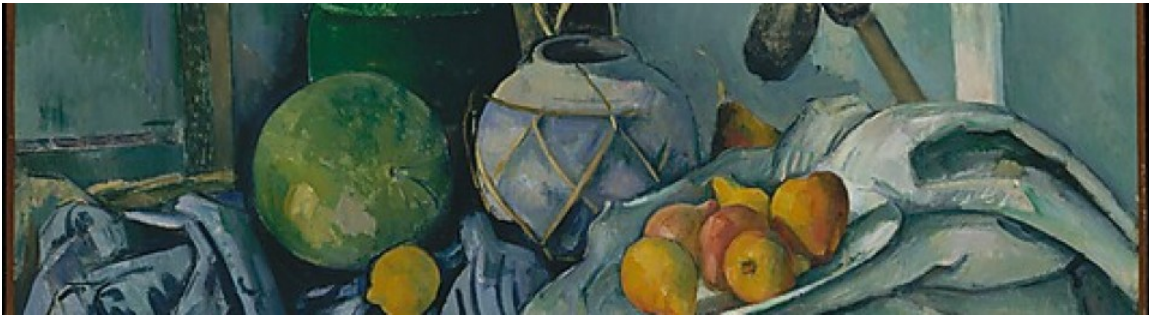
After the vacation discussion, the two decide with some reluctance to take Luther along with them to an office party, which takes up the bulk of the 80-minute play. It is here that I suspected a canine metaphor because—spoiler alert—Luther winds up biting the face of a man at the party, and a police captain tells Walter and Marjorie that if he is found guilty, he will have to be "put down." But how can a dog be a war veteran? Is the playwright saying that war veterans are treated like dogs?

Instead of a trial, all agree to engage in a kind of encounter session, presided over by a social worker named Fran Lebowitz, who is played by a hand puppet. (The puppeteer is Crystal Finn, who also for some reason enacts two puppet characters at the party.) The scene, like many moments in "Luther," reads like a subtle send-up of contemporary urban middle-class mores. These moments would be a lot funnier if the audience were not so disoriented. Lipton and director Ken Rus Schmoll need to be more clear and decisive about the world they have created.

Moreno gives the strongest performance, a charismatic actor even when playing an inarticulate, um, being. But a duo with better comic timing—say a young version of Jerry Stiller and Anne Meara—might have made more out of the couple's squabbles. A high point should be the discussion of their plan to economize: eliminating takeout, buying wine by the case, and, at Marjorie's suggestion, selling off their theater tickets.

"That would be great," Walter replies. "Plus, that way we don't have to go to the theater."

Presented by Clubbed Thumb, in association with Gotham Stage Company, as part of Summerworks 2012 at Here Arts Center, 145 Sixth Ave., NYC. June 11–17. Mon., Wed.–Sun., 8:30 p.m. (212) 352-3101, (866) 811-4111, or www.here.org.



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Thursday
JUN 2012

NEITHER MARTIN LUTHER, OR KING JR—SOMEONE ELSE ENTIRELY— Theatre Review of 'Luther'

Posted by Christopher Alexander Gellert in Theatre

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Tags

adoption, Bobby
Moreno, Ethan Lipton,
Gibson Frazier, Here
Arts Center, Kelly
Mares, Ken Rus
Schmoll, PTSD,
Summerworks, war



--- The nuclear family yet to go nuclear.

Set in a not entirely dystopian future, presumably in our fair city when packs of wild dogs roam the streets at night, *Luther* is the story of two parents and their son, Luther (Bobby Moreno)- though Luther is not really their son, and this isn't because they adopted him a couple years ago. Luther is a grown man and ex-army. His 'parents,' Walter (Gibson Frazier) and Marjorie (Kelly Mares) struggle to lift his spirits and heal his psychic wounds after the trauma of war. They are brave to try, but their warmth and love cannot erase the slate; there are still heavy etchings on the palimpsest.

None of this is objectionable in theory, and might sound fine in an elevator pitch, and the execution isn't such that the play comes off looking like a soldier maimed by a careless sniper, but neither does it come off looking like Sophie Loren after a bath. It's a solid play, with a solid conceit, and a solid cast. Solid. Still, I felt more tired when I left the theatre than when I went in.

Le Journal de Charles Swann ~ An American In Paris (yes, another one)

Conflict begins to develop when Marjorie convinces Walter to bring Luther to Walter's office party. Luther hasn't left the apartment for a long time, and this will be his first time in the company of strangers since the war. There's a particularly amusing sequence when Luther approaches a waiter (Pete Simpson) and tries to make conversation. Unaware of the man's profession he asks what he does for a living. The waiter tells him he's a doctor specializing in "catertology."

It's difficult for me to pinpoint my issues with *Luther*, because on the surface there's nothing particularly wrong with it, even Luther's final monologue, which might seem overmuch at a glance feels necessary and genuine.

The problem is not that *Luther* isn't ably directed by Ken Rus Schmoll, or competently written by Ethan Lipton, but that the play does not exceed the sum of its parts. It does well enough, and should be commended for its efforts; it's worth seeing, but not something to love or even greatly like.

[Clubbed Thumb](#)'s production of *Luther* plays at the [HERE Arts Center](#) through June 17.
Photo courtesy of Heather Phelps-Lipton.



CurtainUp

The Internet Theater Magazine of Reviews, Features, Annotated Listings

A CurtainUp Review

Luther

By Gregory A. Wilson

they can fill your life with beauty and love until it's pouring out of your eyes, but what are they going to do with that other part of you?— Luther

Gibson Frazier and Kelly Mares



Every era is faced with its own unique problems, its own backdrop against which the actions of the people living in it are forced to operate. It's not too much of a stretch to say that our era is at least partly defined by war. Iraq and Afghanistan are the most obvious examples, but the language of war has become so pervasive that it's infused our daily discourse no matter what our political persuasions: the "war on terror," the "war on debt," the "war on women."

There are eleven year olds who have never known anything other than this default state, and that is a troubling thought, one which leads to three unspoken questions at the heart of the Clubbed Thumb theater company's latest production for Summerworks 2012, the troubling (and troubled) Luther. What happens when soldiers try to leave war behind and reintegrate into society, what happens when this attempt (almost inevitably) fails. . .and who's to blame?

At first blush that seems like a lot to lay on what is billed as a "dark comedy," but dark is an understatement for playwright Ethan Lipton's deeply disturbing examination of a bizarre family and the events which threaten to tear it apart. Walter (Gibson Frazier) and Marjorie (Kelly Mares) are a seemingly ordinary couple, scraping by in a too-small and overpriced apartment. Walter works a vaguely unsatisfying office job, while Marjorie is an unsuccessful freelancer; the two bicker, make up, and generally find frustration and odd comfort in each other's neuroses. But what really ties them together is their "son": Luther (Bobby Moreno), a young war vet whom the two adopted after his return from six years of army service.

I put quotes around "son" advisedly, because it's never entirely clear what exactly Luther is to either Walter and Marjorie or the larger society. Events in the play seem to emphasize how much the couple loves him, but they spend a good portion of their time talking around him. For the first five minutes of the play the two debate about whether to take him to an office party while he lies napping on the couch right under their noses. Society's reaction is similarly erratic. One character expresses admiration for Luther's service, calling him a hero, while another explains that depending on how things go Luther may have to be "put down". . .a comment which elicits no reaction other than general sadness from Luther's adopted parents, as if they're hearing that a

beloved pet may have to be humanely euthanized.

Lipton's world is weird in other ways — like the use of sock puppets to represent some, but not all, of Walter's co-workers and some, but not all, of the officials with whom Luther and his parents have to deal later in the play — but it never goes all the way into absurdity. Representing this kind of Edward Albee meets Avenue Q world is no easy task, but for the most part director Ken Rus Schmoll handles it nicely, letting the production's odd mix of sitcom-esque hijinks, manners comedy and occasional shocking moments play out freely. His cast acquires itself admirably — particularly John Ellison Conlee as Morris, a bizarrely awkward personality right out of *The Office*, and the three leads of *Frazier*, Mares, and Moreno.

Not everything about the play works. The sock puppet seems too clever by half, a stab at satire that doesn't come off since it's so inconsistently applied. In fact, the play often seems caught in between, not sure if it wants to be Harold Pinter or Ricky Gervais, and the tonal inconsistencies this creates are often jarring. Marjorie can be irritating in the extreme (much of what happens in the play is her largely unacknowledged fault), and at times it's difficult to see what Walter sees in her.

Most problematic, of course, is the parents' relationship with their "son." The production goes out of its way to make sure we see they love him, but gives us no reason as to why. Where does the bond come from? What are they really doing for him, other than loving him without context or explanation? What does he do for them, other than give them agita over the potential for another violent outbreak by a deeply traumatized young man who obviously belongs in a mental hospital?

All of these unresolved questions may point to a larger truth at the heart of Lipton's dark vision, that war has consequences both on those who fight it and those to whom the fighters eventually return. Once past the tired platitudes of gratitude for service and expressions of support, the final question remains: what now? If the tense, erratic, violent world of Luther is any indication, the answer may be as murky as the circumstances which prompted the question in the first place.

Luther

Playwright: Ethan Lipton Director: Ken Rus Schmoll

Cast: John Ellison Conlee (Morris), Crystal Finn (Phil / Julie / Police Officer / Fran), Gibson Frazier (Walter), Kelly Mares (Marjorie), Bobby Moreno (Luther), Pete Simpson (Tom / Captain James)

Set Designer: Arnulfo Maldonado

Costume Designer: Jessica Pabst

Lighting Designer: Lucrecia Briceno

Sound Designer: Brandon Walcott

Running time: One hour, twenty minutes with no intermission

HERE Arts Center, 145 6th Ave., (212) 352-3101

Website: <http://www.here.org>

From 6/8/12 to 6/17/12; opening 6/11/12

All performances @ 8:30 p.m.

Tickets: \$18.00, \$15.00 for students and seniors

Reviewed by Dr. Gregory A. Wilson based on June 11th press performance



Saturday, June 16, 2012

THEATER: Luther

The very funny concept behind Luther, the second of three plays running as part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks festival, is that Walter (Gibson Frazier) and Marjorie (Kelly Mares) have adopted a shell-shocked veteran, Luther (Bobby Moreno), whom they treat as a cross between a teenager and a dog -- an animal who doesn't know better and therefore can't be held responsible for his actions. Ethan Lipton wants you to laugh, sure, but he's got a serious end in mind, one that's well-directed by Ken Rus Schmoll, who amps up the pathos so as to make the savagery more shocking. On the one hand, the show is fixated on the artificiality of a callous business class; on the other, it's remarking on the very real difficulty in reintegrating soldiers that we've conditioned to be killers into society. By merging the two worlds at a corporate party -- which are about as far as they can get from one another - - Luther makes some salient points on inhumanity in general, and the ways in which we're desperate to connect.



Photo/Heather Phelps-Lipton

The script, however, could serve from some thematic tightening: Marjorie is having trouble fitting in, too, but her story is overpowered by that of a socially awkward technician, Morris (the excellent John Ellison Conlee), who serves as a

cross between the two worlds. (To be fair, he's infectious; I can understand getting swept away by this particular creation.) Moreover, by focusing on Morris, he steps back from the extremes -- illustrated to a certain degree by the sock-people that puppeteer Crystal Finn is parading about -- and too often uses him to directly comment on themes that may more effectively be left unspoken. (Again, Conlee absolutely nails his heartfelt speech about animals, bullies, and forgiveness, as does Moreno, given his own opportunity; it just feels

too direct.) Some jokes, too, are a little hard to puzzle out: what to make of Captain James (Pete Simpson) and his arbitrator, Fran Leibowitz (Finn)? There's not much of a conclusion, either: Luther voluntarily goes to prison (after maiming or murdering two people), where he's apparently having a fine time, but what's Lipton trying to convey? That we should lock up former soldiers? That, unlike Marjorie and Walter, we shouldn't ignore the psychic baggage of our wards, trusting that love alone can set it right?

Luther is asking the right questions, then; it's just not really answering them -- just entertaining them (and us).

Posted by Aaron Riccio at [2:16 AM](#) _

Luther

nytheatre.com review

reviewed by [Loren Noveck](#) · June 10, 2012

Walter and Marjorie are a pretty ordinary couple. They live in an “up-and-coming” neighborhood in a major city, and they’re financially stretched thin no matter how hard they work (Walter in a boring and underpaid office job and Marjorie as a freelancer). They have good hearts, but they don’t always remember to treat each other kindly with all the stress they’re under. They’re desperately looking forward to a long-overdue vacation (as Marjorie says, “If we lived in a civilized society where 80 percent of our income didn’t go to rent, we might even take one every decade”) and, somewhat over Marjorie’s objections, they have to go to Walter’s office party tonight. And then, there’s Luther.



*Pictured: Kelly Mares, Bobby Moreno, and Gibson Frazier in a scene from *Luther*; photo © Heather Phelps-Lipton*

At the outset of Ethan Lipton’s *Luther* (the second entry in Clubbed Thumb’s annual Summerworks Festival), all we know about Luther is that he can’t be left alone when Walter and Marjorie go on that trip. He’s part of their family unit, but how: Is he a pet? A child? An invalid under their care? Whoever or whatever he is, he’s half-asleep under an afghan on their couch as they bicker while they get ready for the party. Then Marjorie has the idea to bring Luther—somewhat over Walter’s objections this time, as it’s possible Luther might get “psychotically oversensitive.” He has in the past, after all.

All of this is subtle, keenly observed, character-based dark comedy, but there’s an undercurrent of something a little more heightened, a little more stylized. Yet Walter and Marjorie are utterly recognizable and relatable; we see their flaws and their good-faith efforts to rise above them. Their stresses and their insecurities threaten to make them nasty to each other, even as they want to be better. Walter tends toward being a blamer and a worrier (Marjorie asks him, “What do you think would happen if you tried not to worry at all?” and Walter’s answer, mostly serious, is “Sadly, I would burst into flames.”), but he’s also genuinely an optimist about human nature. Marjorie can be a little impulsive and judgmental, but she’s got enormous compassion, too.

But then, there’s that level, slowly growing throughout the play, on which we realize something isn’t quite right here; there’s something going on in this world that *doesn’t* quite align with the world with we know, or with the piece of realist theater we think we’re watching. For one thing, Walter’s colleagues? They’re sock puppets. And then, again, there’s Luther. Who, we slowly realize, is a veteran of the recent wars who’s been adopted by Walter and Marjorie. They love him, and they’re as protective of him as they would be of any child, but there’s damage in him that either they’re blind to or they’ve adjusted to. It becomes radically clear when they put him in a situation with other people that his reactions, his responses, his reading of social cues, aren’t quite calibrated properly for a casual social event. Marjorie’s promised to look out for Luther, but he just wants to talk with people like a “normal” adult.

At the office party, Walter seems content enough, if a little bored, talking to some of his colleagues. After Luther expresses his wish to go off on his own for a bit, Marjorie gets cornered by the socially awkward Morris; after a few cocktails and a little dancing, she grows to find him positively charming. You can almost see the “click” in her brain

when her inhibitions get lowered enough by wine to start thinking Morris is kind of fun—and to start thinking how nice it is to lay down her responsibilities for just a little while. Which, of course, inevitably, is when things start to really go wrong.

What's really makes the play work so effectively is Lipton's control, underscored by Ken Rus Schmoll's economical direction: exposition is measured out in the minimum necessary doses, and we get to know both characters and world with painstaking, thoughtful slowness. The piece ends up grappling with a lot of substantive social issues, and with big ideas about how society does and should work, without a drop of didacticism. All of its developments rise out of the characters; information and opinions are presented fully grounded in emotional situations. It would be easy to get on a soapbox at a lot of points in this play, but that never, ever happens, and Lipton never neglects the little details in service of the big issues: the guy at the office party who wants to talk about shingles; the way Marjorie and Walter rehash fights when they're feeling stressed out and anxious; Luther's anxiety about where to dispose of his gum at the fancy party. Even the play's biggest chunk of exposition (by a police officer late in the play) is entirely germane to the scene in which it's inserted.

Like the writing, the production is restrained and understated; design elements are simple (with a few effects from lighting designer Lucrecia Briseno that change the mood of the space). Schmoll's staging keeps the focus always on the actors: primarily Gibson Frazier and Kelly Mares as Walter and Marjorie, with both the strength and the fragility of their relationship always visible; and Bobby Moreno as Luther, with a genuine sweetness but also an unpredictability that's both endearing and frightening. But the supporting players are strong too: Crystal Finn, who has the challenge of playing an array of bureaucratic sock puppets and making them all part of the piece's world; John Ellison Conlee, strange but well-meaning as Morris; and Pete Simpson, stalwart and unflappable as the piece's functionaries—a waiter Luther interacts with at the party who gives him a lot to think about, and a captain.

And because the piece is just that one notch skewed from an entirely realistic, naturalistic presentation, the moments of heightened emotion, and the moments when we're suddenly faced with the distance between Luther's world and ours, really pack a punch. And it's that emotional punch that makes it work. There's one scene at the end that I think could be a little pared back, but I think it only stands out because the rest of the play has been so understated, so thought-provoking in a quiet way that says a lot about the terrors of our current America, and what it could be very much on the edge of turning into. Marjorie and Walter, like so many of us, want to do the right thing—in an inarticulate, unexpressed way. They don't really know what price they—and others—will pay.

JUN

15

Sherri Kronfeld on Ethan Lipton's "LUTHER" presented by Clubbed Thumb



Kelly Mares (Marjorie), John Ellison Conlee (Morris), Gibson Frazier (Walter) and Bobby Moreno (Luther) in Ethan Lipton's *LUTHER*, part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks 2012.
Photo by Heather Phelps-Lipton

We laughed in startled surprise, we laughed in rueful recognition. Ethan Lipton's likeably odd new play *Luther* centers on one helluva conceit: in a liberal city much like ours, couples can adopt young traumatized veterans, rearing them in the manner one would raise an abused puppy from the animal shelter.

Luther's satire has several societal issues to skewer - war and its human cost is the play's ostensible *raison d'être*, but we are also treated to a hard look at the impoverished lives of the urban not-quite-middle class (harried husband and wife Walter and Marjorie would take vacations more than once a decade "If we lived in a civilized society where 80% of our income didn't go to rent"); the painful superficiality of most social gatherings, especially the dreaded office party (Phil, a boring, sycophantic colleague: "Now, tell me about this thing you're doing with spreadsheets."), one of which provides the centerpiece of the show's action, during which all our main characters attempt to socialize, only to come completely undone; and the role that unchecked violence plays in all of our lives.

This city of rushed, overworked citizens feels mostly recognizable, though Lipton keeps us on our toes with absurdist zingers- in this sort-of-New-York, couples ride horseback through once dangerous dockside neighborhoods that are now hot properties. Four characters are played by amateurish-looking hand puppets, each made deftly distinct by the talented Crystal Finn. The acting is incredibly solid all around- this is one of those casts that should win an award for best ensemble. Walter is a befuddled middle-aged office guy who is just trying to help: "I am not just putting up with things. Ever. I'm trying to make things better." As sympathetically played by Gibson Frazier, we see the kindness that goes to the core of his being, the confusion caused by his sincere attempts to do what's right. Party guest Morris, a nerdy shlub who eventually comes out of his shell - is perfectly portrayed by John Ellison Conlee, who later in the play delivers a touching, powerful monologue about being bullied, about his disdain for violence, and

again we see the soul of an incredibly kind-hearted individual who is somehow always out of place in this hard-edged world. Kelly Mares is spot-on as the brittle, nervous freelancer Marjorie: busy, caring, fearful, protective, bristling at the constraints of her not-quite-right life.



Bobby Moreno (Luther, on couch), Gibson Frazier (Walter, standing) and Kelly Mares (Marjorie, kneeling) in Ethan Lipton's LUTHER, part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks 2012. Photo by Heather Phelps-Lipton

In the title role, Bobby Moreno has a tough job to do and he does it with ease – Luther must be both psychotically violent and charmingly sympathetic, a strange and haunted young man working from a place of instinct and fear. Moreno's fight work in a climatic scene is particularly ferocious (thumbs-up to fight choreographer Dan Safer for creating violence that was both believably dangerous, yet handsomely staged).

The set is simple, minimal, smartly done by set designer Arnulfo Maldonado. Staged crisply and with vigor by talented director Ken Rus Schmoll, Luther is consistently brisk and frequently startling- the friendly audience on the night I viewed the show veered from shocked laughter to pained gasps.

The play is being given a short run by [Clubbed Thumb](#) as part of their excellent annual Summerworks festival, and one wishes it were longer. Hopefully some larger NY theaters won't shy away from the play just because it's already had a production (Luther would be perfect for the Vineyard, Playwrights Horizons upstairs space, Roundabout Underground, Second Stage Uptown- get down there, artistic associates/play development folks!) as well as the new play theaters around America. In the meantime, you have until this Sunday, New Yorkers.

Sherri Kronfeld is a director based in New York and the Artistic Director of Superwolf. Read more about Sherri [HERE](#)

Posted 15th June by [Jody Christopherson](#)



Luther

By Ethan Lipton; Directed by Ken Rus Schmoll

Produced by Clubbed Thumb

Off Broadway, New Play

Runs through 6.17.12

HERE, 145 Sixth Avenue

by Molly Marinik on 6.12.12



Kelly Mares, Gibson Frazier and Bobby Moreno (on couch) in LUTHER. Photo by Heather Phelps-Lipton.

BOTTOM LINE: A social critique on the life of the veteran back home, as told through an odd and funny family drama.

A new take on a timeless issue, *Luther* explores what happens to veterans who return to life post-war. Told as a darkly comedic character study, the play offers insight into the plight of the veteran. And because it is so theatrical (for example, a few of the characters are portrayed as hand puppets) the subject matter's melodramatic trap is avoided. *Luther* is effective as a metaphor rather than an after-school special.

Luther (Bobby Moreno) is a twenty-something veteran who has been adopted by well-intentioned married couple Marjorie (Kelly Mares) and Walter (Gibson Frazier). Though they were offered a profile of Luther's past when they signed the adoption papers they refused to look at it, instead choosing to bring Luther into their lives, shower him with love and support, and grow their family. All is mostly well in Marjorie and Walter's home, save for some difficulty in socializing their new son.

As the play begins, Marjorie and Walter dress for a party and discuss what to do with Luther while they take their highly anticipated upcoming vacation. Despite Luther's clearly adult demeanor (and facial hair), he is talked about as a child who requires care. As often happens within families, what's best for the child can cause disagreement between caregivers, but it's not until the following scene that we understand just how fractured this play's perspective actually is. Luther accompanies Marjorie and Walter to the party, and he and Marjorie agree that both need to embrace opportunities for socialization, so they set out to talk to strangers and enjoy themselves. A misunderstanding occurs and Luther's inner demons are exposed. What was seemingly quirky behavior before is now much more serious: when someone is encouraged to do inhuman acts on the battlefield, he can no longer feel truly human back home. Luther and Marjorie have fun at the party before the incident, each getting to know a stranger and letting loose. Awkward social situations are difficult for everyone, we learn.

Ethan Lipton's very funny script enables a comical party scene of small-talk, cater-waiters, and party-pretense. A truly brilliant moment occurs when Marjorie and new friend Morris (John Ellison Conlee) dance -- Morris is unabashed and Marjorie is initially reserved and then rocks out. Social mores are examined and we can all relate to the weirdness that occurs at work events with free booze.

Lipton's play lets us see the toll that war takes on a soldier from his personal perspective, as well as from the viewpoint of those who love him. To adopt an adult seems like a preposterous notion, until we experience Luther's acclimation back into society -- he is treated as a kid, or worse, as a dog. After Luther causes a scene at the party, his parents say things like "he normally loves people" and "he has a past." This unintentionally condescending response illuminates Lipton's social examination of the post-war veteran. Through Luther's own eyes the struggle is clear.

Ken Rus Schmoll's direction is tight and smart. Though we get the big picture party scene and later the cold sterility of the jail, we are always aware of Marjorie, Walter and Luther as caring individuals trying to do right. Schmoll keeps the focus on the humanity, which is the point, after all. Through sincere performances from the entire cast, we never doubt the absurd details of adult adoption. Everyone, particularly nerdy Morris (who describes himself as a perpetual victim) experiences difficulty relating to one another. In this, we see that Luther is not necessarily as alone as he thinks he is, though his circumstances (and those of his fellow soldiers) are unavoidably fatalistic.

(*Luther* plays as part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks 2012 at HERE, 145 Sixth Avenue, through June 17, 2012. Performances are Wednesdays through Sundays at 8:30PM. Tickets are \$18. To purchase tickets visit here.org or call 212.352.3101. For more information visit clubbedthumb.org.)

NY Review: 'Motel Cherry'

Clubbed Thumb and New Georges at Here Arts Center as part of Summerworks 2012

Reviewed by Jonathan Mandell
June 24, 2012

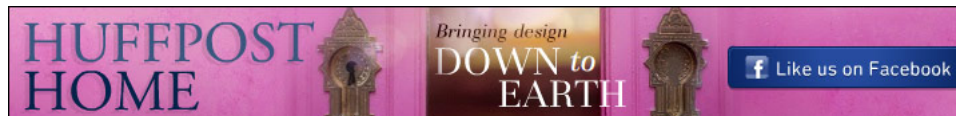
"Motel Cherry," the third and final play in Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks 2012 festival, is in part an updated and downsized American version of the 1932 movie "Grand Hotel," the Oscar winner about the intersecting lives of a hotel's guests, in which Greta Garbo famously utters the line "I want to be alone." But Peggy Stafford's new play does more than just mix and match guests in a motel in a remote area of Washington state. The nine actors also double as animals, inanimate objects, and characters straight out of unfamiliar fairy tales.

Albert (Steven Boyer), the manager who inherited the Motel Cherry from his mother, introduces each of the guests to their rooms and to the audience. There is Mrs. Johnson (Linda Marie Larson), a middle-aged virgin who loves animals and fills her room with their cages; John (DJ Mendel), a truck driver who is about to fall off the wagon; his wife, Patty (Monique Vukovic), whom he met at an A.A. meeting and who wants to have a baby, while John does not; Reverend Joe (Noel Allain), whose wife, Linda (Francis Benhamou), wants to have sex with him though the pastor does not seem interested; Mark, a traveling copy-machine salesman (Mike Shapiro), who is interested in Linda; Joan (Boo Killebrew), a bruised waitress escaping her abusive boyfriend; and Lynette (Eboni Booth), a high schooler who keeps to herself and groans a lot. We don't learn why she's in pain until the end of the play, in a well-done climactic monologue that serves to unite the rest of the guests.

Most characters have some kind of secret. Most also seem to have their own personal fairy tale, which comes out of nowhere. Mrs. Johnson suddenly talks about the time she brought her horse to Hawaii for a pineapple, and then we see (in an apparent flashback) Mrs. Johnson consulting with a mole about the trip, horse in tow, while a lion narrates. In another scene, a gerbil visits the dentist.

Under Meghan Finn's direction, the acting works better when the performers are playing animals, because as humans they mostly portray what can charitably be called archetypes. Given few layers to play, Mendel is persuasively rough-hewn as John, Larson is daffy as Mrs. Johnson, Allain is distant as Reverend Joe, Shapiro is crude as Mike, etc. The playwright drops hints that the motel manager is not just a motor-mouth but also a stalker, if not an outright pervert (hints of Norman Bates), but Boyer comes off as vague and mild-mannered, nearly a cipher. An exception is Booth, who sheds a real tear as she delivers that final revelatory speech.

There are a few such touching moments, as well as a bit of humor and a few sexy interludes. But little holds "Motel Cherry" together as a single satisfying work. It says something that the most consistent, integrated element in the show is Shane Rettig's impressive sound design. Wait for the descending helicopter



April 17, 2013

HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Can I Hold Your Gerbil Again?: Peggy Stafford's *Motel Cherry*

Posted: 06/29/2012 10:03 am

Seeing a great new piece of theatre makes me really happy. Seeing a great new piece of theatre by a female playwright that mixes quirky characters in a realistic motel environment with surreal flights into those characters' minds? Needless to say, I walked out of *Motel Cherry* with a gigantic smile on my face.

Produced as part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks 2012, in collaboration with New Georges, Peggy Stafford's script brings together a group of people staying in "Motel Cherry," owned and operated by Albert (Steven Boyer). From the start we see that there are guests ranging from regulars, like Mrs. Johnson (Linda Marie Larson), to couples on the road like Patty (Monique Vukovic) and John (DJ Mendel), to mysterious strangers like Lynette (Ebony Booth), whose room keeps emanating strange noises. As these characters interact with each other, we learn more about their vulnerabilities as well as their hopes and dreams.

Stafford's clever writing is well-supported by an incredibly talented cast, without a weak link. In addition to those already named, we also have overnight guests Joan (Boo Killebrew) who is clearly running from something, copier salesman Mark (Mike Shapiro), and Revered Joe (Noel Joseph Allain) and wife Linda (Francis Benhamou). For those of you who read my reviews regularly, you might remember Boo Killebrew from *The Deepest Play Ever*, who was a standout performer then as well as now. But here she finds her match with this group of actors that perform like a solid ensemble.

Part of this energetic dynamic is due to the fact that almost every actor plays multiple parts in each others' dream-like sequences. Of course, this success is also the result of Meghan Finn's excellent direction. Not only does she achieve excellent performances from each actor, but she also utilizes Daniel Zimmerman's set in a creative way. Lighting designer Brian Aldous, Costume Designer Tilly Grimes, and Sound Designer Shane Rettig also have a great deal to do with making the realistic and surrealistic aspects of the play both discrete and independently successful.

This play could not have been better chosen for a collaboration between Clubbed Thumb, a company dedicated to producing provocative new plays by living American writers, and New Georges, which produces new works by venturesome artists (who are women). It's refreshing to see a play that treats both its male and female characters with compassion as they attempt to work through their own sexualities. Here I do not mean sexuality as in partner choice, but rather comfort with what each character desires. These people are all trying to deal with their own conception of themselves as sexual beings who have wants and needs, something which neither glorifies nor vilifies them. They are all simply people.

Motel Cherry is only playing through Saturday, June 30th, so you should go get your tickets right away! If you have any interest in seeing an entertaining show with fantastic performances then you should head down to HERE Arts Center. And if you're lucky, maybe Mrs. Johnson will even let you hold her gerbil.

Follow Bess Rowen on Twitter: www.twitter.com/sbessr

27 Wednesday Jun 2012

Tags

Albert (Steven Boyer) checks in John (DJ Mendel) and Patty (Monique Vukovic).

Freud had much to say on our unconscious mind in his *Analysis of Dreams* (among other works where he deals with the subterranean depths of the mind) but whenever a dream appears in a work of fiction— a novel, a play, or a film— I find myself wishing I were the unconscious one. The author Michael Chabon recently wrote a short piece for *The New York Review of Books* on why he bans dreams from the breakfast table, and generally abhors them in a piece titled “[Why I Hate Dreams](#).” Rarely our dreams can be powerful visions. More commonly they are accumulated clutter and detritus: the somnolent equivalent of your notes from 8th grade math forsaken somewhere in a brown cardboard box, with the corresponding anxieties of failure. Unlike the equations you didn’t grasp decades ago, your dreams are not likely to ever make much sense, and they don’t need to either. Theatre, especially narrative theatre, should.

In Peggy Stafford’s new play, *Motel Cherry*, directed by Meghan Finn, a diverse selection of citizens pulls into the titular motel located in a remote corner of Washington State. The guests are so stereotypically varied that you might think they were jurors sequestered from a media blitz in a high profile trial, or luckless souls in the kind of film where a ragged band of dew-eyed teenagers make the mistake of passing the night in a den of horrors never to return. The folks in this play are more likely to be jurors; for the most part they’re middle-aged and all of them are in one way or another sexually frustrated. Some chainsaws or ghouls might enliven the play, though. It’s difficult to say.

<!--more Continuer à lire...-->

The capable and luckless cast includes Albert (Steven Boyer) the proprietor of the motel who has difficulty relating to women and has the unfortunate habit of stalking each one he takes a fancy to. There’s Mrs. Johnson (Linda Marie Larson) a fifty-one year old virgin who comforts herself with a travelling menagerie (at least this one won’t shatter). Reverend Joe (Noel Allain) talks of children but won’t sleep with his wife

Linda. Instead he takes interest in John (DJ Mendel) a relapsed alcoholic who sleeps with his wife Patty (Monique Vukovic) gladly but denies her children. Joe's wife Linda (Francis Benhaumou) is willing to fill her need with any available man, and Mark (Mike Shapiro) a travelling copier salesman happens to do. Boo Killebrew plays a battered waitress (Joan) and skulks in the background with few lines and little reason to exist. Eboni Booth rounds out the cast as Lynette: a straight-A high school student. The play climaxes with her monologue about sex in the bleachers by the track. From the sound of it, she didn't climax much and neither does the play. It's a strange note to craft as the focal point for the action; we've heard little from Lynette over the course of the evening, and what wider themes her speech illustrates is unclear.

The real obscurity lies in the fantastic dream interludes. Albert imagines himself a prince next in line to the throne who wants nothing to do with reigning or ruling, and flees when a wizard threatens to execute him if he abdicates. Mrs. Johnson converses with actors in horse and mole heads; she and horse plan on traveling to Hawaii in search of pineapples. Reverend Joe is frightened by a giant dragonfly, and so on. It's valuable to compare these splices of the unconscious to magical-realist storytelling; the narratives of Márquez present incredible acts as part of ordinary life, allowing us accept them without complaint. Crucially, they alter the lives of his characters. The dreams in *Motel Cherry* merely serve to blur themes, arcs and the play itself. They leave no impression on the motel's guest, and only serve to irritate and bewilder those of us in the house. Without the dreams, this might have been a typically mediocre tale of dysfunctional humans passing through. With them it's an outright mess. Though like our dreams, the memory of the performance slips from our minds like sand from an hourglass and all is soon forgotten. That's probably for the best.

-C.H.

145 Avenue of the Americas.

Photo courtesy of Heather Phelps-Lipton.

Motel Cherry

nytheatre.com review

June 23, 2012

When we are allowed to reside, for a time, in in-between spaces there is a thrill that occurs, giving us the freedom to explore what might happen if we indulged in our deepest wishes. This is why we travel, why we get lost, and why the motel room has gained a mythic status as a site for transgression and potential revelation. These one-off nights on the way to our final destination always seem a bit surreal, from the tiny bars of soap, to the already-made bed, to the noises on the other side of the wall. It is this in-between space, between home and somewhere else, that we often consider how our deepest fantasies, as sordid as they may be, might be realized.

The roadside motel, a familiar structure in the landscape of Americana, is the setting for Peggy Stafford's new play *Motel Cherry*, which serves as the vehicle for a group of vastly disparate and off-kilter individuals to encounter each other over the course of one night. The guests of *Motel Cherry* are all coming from some other place on the way to another; the specifics are less important, what is important is that they've all ended up, perhaps by chance, in this dive motel run with feverish devotion by owner Albert, who will gladly direct you to the ice machine. *Motel Cherry* is abundant in ice.

As Albert narrates how he co-founded the motel with his mother, we are introduced to the bizarre guests: Mrs. Johnson, a lonely animal fanatic and a regular at the motel; Reverend Joe, who is constantly being tested by his higher power, his wife Linda, who hasn't been receiving the marital favors she'd like; John, a grizzly bear-fearing truck driver and his chain-smoking wife Patty, who desperately wants to get pregnant; Mark, a traveling salesman pushing copy machines; Joan, a down-on-her-luck waitress escaping from her abusive boyfriend; and finally, Lynette, a mysterious teenager, from whose room ominous sounds are emitting. Not long after we meet these eccentric characters, the play dives into the magical, transporting us into their individual fantasies and obsessions. The convening of this unlikely group opens up as a chance for confrontation and destiny. Objects throughout the play (little bars of soap, a lost and found glass dragonfly) take on the role of totems for unfulfilled wishes. As they negotiate their rooms (Mark cannot get his TV remote to work) and their love lives (Patty switches rooms to escape her bear-paranoid husband), the characters are forced to reckon with their newly found temporary neighbors.

And as the night goes on, the guests grow increasingly concerned about the attendant in room "Red Dot," and as to what the strange mournful cries from the behind the door might mean. The play grows closer in on itself as each of the guests must confront each other in their joint curiosity. What exactly is happening on the other side of the thin motel walls? And do we want to know?

What I loved most about this play is that playwright Stafford presents complicated, messy characters with such wholeheartedness. She is able to do this and tap into a magical realism of her own, without any irony or force. This is something to admire. She has written characters that could easily be performed with two-dimensionality, but the incredibly adept ensemble has crafted them with texture and pliability. The cast transcends the potential trappings that the work could present, making the fantastical aspects of the play feel unassuming and natural.

These are truly top-notch performances by an ensemble that warrant witnessing. I don't remember the last time I saw an ensemble perform seemingly absurd situations with such stealth, sincerity, and camaraderie. They are comprised of Noel Joseph Allain (Reverend Joe), Francis Benhamou (Linda), Eboni Booth (Lynette), Steven Boyer (Albert), Boo Killebrew (Joan), Linda Marie Larson (Mrs. Johnson), DJ Mendel (John), Mike Shapiro (Mark), and Monique Vukovic (Patty). Of particular note, Benhamou gives a pitch-perfect comedic performance as Linda. And Booth's portrayal of Lynette gives the play an emotional punch that grounds the events. Booth must accomplish quite a feat here. Without giving anything away—it's a remarkable moment and as is the case with true ensemble work it is supported by the entire company. Meghan Finn has directed the production with a swift hand and you can see her work throughout as the piece moves fluidly in and out of motel rooms, constantly changing perspective. It is as if we are gazing on through the lens of a camera. Daniel Zimmerman's impressive set solves the constant movement of the play, evoking the iconography of motels we've all spent passing nights in. As a part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks, *Motel Cherry* only has one weekend left and if you want to see a definition of exemplary ensemble work, I would not miss this one.

Rooms Where Norman Bates Would Feel at Home 'Motel Cherry,' by Peggy Stafford, at Here Arts Center



Heather Phelps-Lipton

Motel Cherry, by Peggy Stafford, with, from left, Monique Vukovic, Steven Boyer and D J Mendel, in a production with New Georges at the Here Arts Center.

Dysfunction is the name of the game in Peggy Stafford's *Motel Cherry* the concluding play in Clubbed Thumb's annual Summerworks festival of new works by emerging writers. If you've checked into this roadside motel, odds are you have some sort of problem. And odds are it has something to do with sex: You want it, you don't want it, you can't get it, you've had it (or tried inappropriately to have it) and now are suffering the consequences.

Directed by Meghan Finn and co-produced by New Georges, the 90-minute play seethes with these tensions. Daniel Zimmerman's effective set, aided by Shane Rettig's sound design, efficiently evokes the sort of dumpy, bare-bones motels that dot American highways.

Ms. Stafford's characters are also familiar types. They include Albert (Steven Boyer), the accommodating but creepy proprietor; Mrs. Johnson (Linda Marie Larson), the high-strung animal lover whose pets stand in for human companions; and the repressed Reverend Joe (Noel Joseph Allain), who won't sleep with his wife but just might have a less than spiritual interest in John (D J Mendel), the not-so-recovering alcoholic who won't procreate with his wife, Patty (Monique Vukovic), because of his hard-knocks childhood.

And on and on. The plotlines are predictable. Yet there is much drama to be mined from them, and this is a solid ensemble of actors. Eboni Booth as Lynette does yeoman's work with a monologue about teenage sex, and infuses Albert with such ambiguous vulnerability that you can't ever quite decide whether to root for or against him. In numerous quiet ways they are able to tease out nuances in their characters so that what might be stock becomes somewhat stranger.

The production's larger problem is its straining for a more obvious sort of strangeness. The script, which features many dreamlike interludes and some plodding overexplaining, creates a rather tone-deaf zaniness that is exacerbated by some of Ms. Finn's directorial choices, including cartoonish voice-overs. Without all that padding, but instead seeing its melodramas through, "*Motel Cherry*" would still be plenty strange and a lot more satisfying.

"*Motel Cherry*" runs through June 30 at the Here Arts Center, 145 Avenue of the Americas, at Dominick Street, South Village; (212) 352-3101, here.org.

Motel Cherry

By Peggy Stafford; Directed by Meghan Finn

Produced by Clubbed Thumb

Off Off Broadway, New Play

Runs through 6.30.12

HERE, 145 Sixth Avenue



Boo Killebrew in *MOTEL CHERRY*.

BOTTOM LINE: A talented cast and versatile set add much to a surreal and fragmented script centered on a mismatched group of hotel guests attempting to exorcise their demons.

At the center of the Summer Works 2012 play *Motel Cherry* is Norman Bates-esque Albert (expertly embodied by Steven Boyer), the creepy caretaker of a run-down motel owned by his mother, who has at least one restraining order against him stemming from his stalkerish tendencies. He spends his days hounding attractive female guests to whom he offers containers of Cup-A-Soup and the occasional discount. Among the weary travelers seeking solace at the motel are: a troubled high school girl (Ebony Booth); Mrs. Johnson (Linda Marie Larson), who travels with a menagerie of animals that may or may not actually exist; a reverend (Joseph Allain) and his sexually frustrated wife (Francis Benhamou); a waitress in an abusive relationship (Boo Killebrew); two recovering alcoholics in a problematic relationship (DJ Mendel and Monique Vukovic); and a lonely man looking to lose himself in the pleasure of pay-per-view porn and McDonald's french fries (Mike Shapiro).

Apparently, *Motel Cherry* is so remote that no one's cell phone has reception, and it certainly seems to be somewhere off the grid, removed from the confines of reality. In David Lynch-esque surrealness, the night's guests of the motel confront their inner demons and desires, be it dreaming of a romantic Hawaii vacation with a human-like horse, speaking to a giant buzzing aqua marine butterfly, being instructed on masturbating by a strange Russian woman, finding a giant red butterfly sitting on your nose in light of coping with an abusive relationship, or being told by an ominous voice and flashing vacuum cleaner that you are in fact destined to be a king.

Regardless of one's own interpretation of the events that unfold on the HERE stage, the work certainly proves to be both attention grabbing and memorable. The fact that the work delves so far outside of reality and focuses on so many multiple storylines and characters gives it a fragmented feel with limited character development. Nevertheless, there is plenty to admire here: a highly versatile set that sets a foreboding tone,

an immensely talented cast, a sometimes humorous script, and excellent staging by Meghan Finn. Greater development scriptwise, however, could have strengthened the power of this work.

(*Motel Cherry* plays at HERE, 145 Sixth Street, through June 30, 2012. Performances are Thursdays at 8:30PM; Fridays at 8:30PM; and Saturdays at 8:30PM. Tickets are \$18 and are available at here.org or by calling 212.352.3101.)

Review: Motel Cherry, part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks 2012

In Peggy Stafford's strenuously quirky new play, damaged souls meet at a roadside rest stop.

By Helen Shaw Wed Jun 27 2012

Time Out Ratings



Photograph: Heather Phelps-Lipton

[HERE](#). By Peggy Stafford. Dir. Meghan Finn. With ensemble cast. 1hr 35mins. No intermission.

Much like June itself, Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks is ending with uninspiring weather: rather muggy, slightly damp. Peggy Stafford's seriocomic Motel Cherry doesn't bomb, there's too much competence arrayed around it for that. Instead it fizzles slowly, smothered by a welter of ideas and a certain pervading glumness. Everyone does their respective jobs in realizing Stafford's tale of injured eccentrics at a sad little highway motel: There's a clever, row-of-doors set by Daniel Zimmerman, and director Meghan Finn hires some of our smartest theater creatures to roam it. The magic never catches, though; the fire never lights.

When we realize Motel Cherry stands in Washington State, we automatically expect the uncanny — touches like the anxious lady with her covered birdcages (Linda Marie Larson) and a mysterious dragonfly figurine (is it sentient?) could have oozed over the county line from Twin Peaks. Stafford's basic pattern is Lynchian too—domestic upsets (a reverend rejects his sexually desperate wife) alternate with mentions of the Dark Woods and eerie magical bits.

All these elements pull hard, but they haul in so many different directions that the dramaturgy comes to a standstill. We've just started getting a nice Psycho frisson from twitchy proprietor Albert (Stephen Boyer) when we reverse course to worry about a new tenant, a realistically abused waitress (Boo Killebrew). We then lurch into pseudo-Lovecraftian mode (the dragonfly tchotchke becomes a demiurge), only to be yanked into a teenager's monologue about miscarriage. Stafford means this to be a plenitude of plenitudes, with a new genre behind every motel door. Instead it just lingers in an unhappy, crowded stasis—the wheels never go, despite everyone frantically shifting gears.



Review: Takarazuka!!!

A new play goes backstage at a Japanese cultural phenomenon.

By Jenna Scherer Fri Jun 1 2012

Time Out Ratings

Rating: 4/5



Photograph: Heather Phelps Lipto

[HERE](#). By Susan Soon He Stanton. Dir. Lear deBessonet. With ensemble cast. 1hr 30mins. No intermission.

Tales of backstage backbiting have been catnip to theater lovers ever since Eve Harrington wormed her way into Margo Channing's dressing room. But for all the dust this genre has accumulated over the years, there's something truly fresh about Takarazuka!!!, Susan Soon He Stanton's new play that's a weird, compelling mix of gender-studies lesson, Japanese cultural deconstruction, absurdist comedy and, er, Black Swan.

For Westerners unfamiliar with the phenom, the Takarazuka Revue is a real-life all-ladies theater company that's been a cultural institution in Japan since 1914; the troupe performs ridiculously opulent Broadway-style numbers drawn from the Western musical theater canon. As Stanton would have it, Takarazuka is more like a cult—one that indoctrinates and trains its members to a tee, raises them high, then tosses them unceremoniously back into society when their runs are up.

Set in the 1970s, Stanton's play follows Yuko (Jennifer Ikeda, of NBC's *Smash*), a "top star" of the troupe who's worshipped by fans for her uncanny, elegant portrayals of male roles. When she's forced to retire, Yuko trades the the spotlight and her glittery tux for an unbearably quiet life in the country. A visiting BBC documentarist (Paul Juhn) becomes fascinated by her, even as Yuko finds herself falling under the thrall of a ghost of Takarazuka's past (Angela Lin).

There's a lot to chew on in Stanton's snappy, strange little play, being presented as part of Clubbed Thumb's adventurous [Summerworks 2012](#) festival. Not all of it works, but a lot of it does—whether we're watching jittering fangirls wax rhapsodic, a dead woman recall her gruesome suicide or an old man on a train revealing the dark underbelly of Japanese politeness. Director Lear deBessonet's production latches onto the heightened, stylized tone of Stanton's script and runs with it.

But the main draw is Ikeda, who's magnetic and unabashedly theatrical as the conflicted protagonist. She sells the campier aspects of Stanton's story as well as Yuko's very human anguish, and sings her heart out in a surprisingly chilling rendition of Tom Jones throwback "Delilah." Though it ends on an off-note anticlimax, *Takarazuka!!!* is compelling not only as a viscerally satisfying behind-the-curtain melodrama, but also as a haunting parable on fractured cultural identity.

NY Review: 'Takarazuka!!!'

Clubbed Thumb Summerworks 2012 at HERE

By Jonathan Mandell
May 29, 2012



Photo by Heather Phelps Lipton

"TAKARAZUKA!!!"

“Takarazuka!!!,” the first play of three-play festival Clubbed Thumb Summerworks 2012, offers a fascinating glimpse into the unusual real-life theater and school founded by a railroad tycoon 99 years ago in the Japanese city of Takarazuka. The Takarazuka Revue offers lavish productions of Western-style musicals in

which all the men’s parts are played by women trained from a young age in the Takarazuka school. The aim of the training, as one character explains in Susan Soon He Stanton’s new play, is to create “an army of perfect wives.... [T]he reasoning is that we understand how to be a man. We can give a man his freedom but also know how to tie a tie perfectly.”

It is 1975, and Nigel, a half-Japanese filmmaker from the BBC, visits Takarazuka to make a documentary focusing on Yuko, the premier male impersonator. The setup allows us to learn the complex culture of the Takarazuka theater, where stars such as Yuko must retire after only a short while, and Nigel—who of course becomes smitten with Yuko—is there for her sayonara performance and its aftermath, which is both prosaic and otherworldly.

The fictional story that the playwright cooks up around the real if eerie world of Takarazuka theater is a relatively weak stew flavored with everything from “Victor/Victoria” to “M. Butterfly” to “Farewell My Concubine” to “The Red Shoes.” But this hardly matters, given some riveting scenes and wonderful performances.

Jennifer Ikeda is ideal as the androgynous Yuko, a fisherman's daughter who studied the films of James Dean and Montgomery Clift "until I could walk across the room as only a man can." We first see her in a convincing Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers duet with Brooke Ishibashi as Chifumi, Yuko's insecure acting and dancing partner. Ishibashi is first-rate in the role of Chifumi, who has a crush on the star but also envies and resents her. She has a second role as a gushing young fan, one of the screaming throng drawn to the Takarazuka theater since Justin Bieber's grandfather was a young man.

Presented by Clubbed Thumb Summerworks 2012 at HERE, 145 Sixth Ave., NYC. May 29–June 4, 8:30 p.m. (212) 352-3101 or www.here.org.