

[May 30](#)

**Sherri Kronfeld on "Baby Screams Miracle" by Clare Barron, presented by Clubbed Thumb in the SUMMERWORKS Festival**



Caitlin O'Connell, left, and Ismenia Mendes

Clubbed Thumb has rarely presented a show more on target with their mission of producing “Funny, Strange, Provocative” new writing than with its season opener *Baby Screams Miracle*. This new play by Clare Barron takes an American family already deeply enmeshed in its own weirdness and plunges them suddenly into a chaotic world that grows stranger by the minute.

Barron and her excellent director Portia Krieger have created a production in which for the entire duration of the evening the cast and the audience hang suspended within an impossibly heightened state of intensity. It's that kind of bright, shimmering nearly crazed anxiety in which one might suddenly burst out laughing. The laughter bursts out, relieving the pressure momentarily, and then the weirdness creeps back in...

There's something to the particular world of this play that has me hesitating to provide a typical plot description. *Baby Screams Miracle* is a satisfyingly peculiar family-nightmare-mystery-storm-freakout-session, almost more dream than play at times. The more we give away here, the less power this odd play would have over you, were you to see it (and by the way, see it!)

Scribbled in my notebook in complete darkness, over and over again was the word 'extreme'. The world of *Baby Screams Miracle* is one in which a freak storm starts out bad and turns apocalyptic, harsh accidents described ranging from a neighborhood child being decapitated, to a main character losing a foot, to a family dog dying, to a neighborhood house seen burned to a crisp, to an unfortunate accident with a tree in the woods... and yet somehow there's still sensuality and laughter. A few flashes and fragments of the show that have stayed with me:

1. The little frame house under attack. High wind and then a tree branch crashes through the ceiling. Later, water pours through the ceiling, drenching faces
2. An apropos-of-nothing masturbation scene in which the very pregnant matriarch, in a non-sexy moment, tries to get herself off with the aid of her husband's verbal cue, and both fail miserable/hilariously.
3. A child gleefully jumps on a mini-trampoline that in the course of the storm somehow wended its way from the backyard into the house. With each leap, her braid snaps the air, she grins, and the lightning goes bang!
4. Two pregnant women, a mom and her long-lost adult daughter, sit by the bathtub, laughing hysterically over how the younger one lost her foot...

5. A whole family sleeping willy-nilly in one bed and scattered around the floor beside.
6. In darkness, just one light lit, the 'Jesus candle'..
7. The forgotten weirdness of peeing in the woods.
8. Carrying a smelly, dead dog in a bloody sheet, a kind of totem of the former normalcy that's since been lost.
9. Projected trees swirling ghost-like around the backdrop of the set...



Ismenia Mendes

An incredibly well-cast ensemble is needed to pull off the high wire act that is this play, and fortunately Clubbed Thumb brought a great group together. The glue holding this crunchily crazed world are the wild-eyed, prayerful, often bloody husband Gabriel (Danny Wolohan) and his bright, funny and practical wife Carol (Danielle Skraastad). Kudos to the whole group however, as again it took each one's full commitment to maintain this strikingly strange energy for the course of the evening.

Clubbed Thumb's runs are short: you have only until June 2 to catch *Baby Screams Miracle*. Get there and see this – I promise you won't stop thinking about it.

### **Baby Screams Miracle**

by Clare Barron, directed by Portia Krieger featuring: Susannah Flood, Ismenia Mendes, Caitlin O'Connell, Danielle Skraastad and Danny Wolohan

scenic designer: Daniel Zimmerman

costume designer: Sarah Laux

lighting designer: Derek Wright

sound designer: Brandon Wolcott

projection designer: Bart Cortright

May 24 – June 2

[Tickets](#) \$18/\$15

Presented [by Clubbed Thumb](#)  
at The Wild Project

195 E. 3rd Street

# *Baby Screams Miracle*

By Clare Barron; Directed by Portia Krieger

Produced by Clubbed Thumb

Off Off Broadway, New Play

Runs through 6.2.13

The Wild Project, 195 E. 3rd Street

by [Benjamin Coleman](#) on 5.30.13



Danny Wolohan and Danielle Skraastad in *BABY SCREAMS MIRACLE*. Photography by: Heather Phelps-Lipton.

**BOTTOM LINE:** This story of a family struggling to weather a deadly storm is given an excellent production that succeeds on all accounts.

The set may be crumbling before our eyes, but Clare Barron's new play is a solid structure with the potential to weather any impending storm. Wind blows through the skeletal wooden scenery, rattling window slats, bringing trees down, and leaking water and dirt into Daniel Zimmerman's deceptively simple set. The modest home on stage is hardly a prepossessing visual, however, under the directorial hand of Portia Krieger, some miraculous happenings are underway at The Wild Project, where Clubbed Thumb's production of *Baby Screams Miracle*, is currently playing.

*Baby Screams Miracle* is the first of Clubbed Thumb's 2013 Summerworks series, and they are off to a terrific start! The play takes place in the home of Carol and Gabriel in Eureka, Washington, where they live with their 6-year old daughter, Kayden, and Carol's mother, Barbara. The pregnant Carol (played with riveting layers by Danielle Skraastad) somewhat ambivalently prays with her devoted husband (portrayed with unflinching amiability by Danny Wolohan), who seems to have more of an investment in his religion, not to mention his marriage and his family. When the couple retires to bed, ominous clouds sweep across the stage (projections by Bart Cortright), representing the encroaching storm that will soon uproot the trees, the home, and the lives of this unsuspecting family. Right on the heels of this violent storm, comes the arrival of Cynthia (a marvelously oddball Susannah Flood), the 26-year old (also pregnant) daughter of Carol and Gabriel. It is soon learned that Cynthia was conceived when her parents were teenagers, and given away shortly after her birth. Although Cynthia keeps in loose contact with her biological family, her arrival tilts the dynamic as they struggle throughout the storm.

Barron's play weaves together ideas of love, patience, and forgiveness set amidst a world of chaos and mayhem. The storm is the loudest and most rageful character in the play; while the humans seek to stifle and cover up what may be bubbling underneath the surface of their fraught personas. Much to Barron's credit, she turns the storm into more than a natural occurrence--it also serves to amplify the inner lives of the family, and move the action forward in both a literal and metaphoric way.

Krieger's direction breathes life into Barron's text, in a highly theatrical production that utilizes scrappy raw materials. Through Krieger, Barron's affecting piece hits all the right marks. From the technical elements, to the fleshed out acting performances, to the staging, to the script itself, *Baby Screams Miracle* is an incredibly worthwhile piece of theatre. It would be cliché to say that one will be "blown away" by this production or "swept off one's feet," but the sentiment still applies, and the accolades are deserved. *Baby Screams Miracle* is a testament to the ambition of Clubbed Thumb, and it also demonstrates the necessity of producing works by emerging writers like Ms. Barron. I can hardly think of a better reason to travel to the Lower East Side.

(*Baby Screams Miracle* is playing at The Wild Project, 195 E. 3rd Street, between Avenues A and B, through June 2, 2013. Performances are nightly at 8PM. Tickets are \$18, or \$15 for students, and can be purchased online at [clubbedthumb.org](http://clubbedthumb.org) or [ovationtix.com](http://ovationtix.com).)

## Summerworks Festival



Photograph: Heather Phelps-Lipton

Rating: 4/5

Wed May 29 2013

**Theater review by Helen Shaw. Summerworks Festival: *Baby Screams Miracle*. By Clare Barron. Dir. Portia Krieger. With ensemble cast. 1hr 35mins. No intermission.**

If I just describe Clare Barron's *Baby Screams Miracle*, a funny enviro-horror domestic drama, I worry that you might get the wrong impression. In fact, my own affection keeps teetering to and away from it—the hallmark of a genuinely fragile, complex piece of work.

In rudest outline, the piece is about a storm laying siege to a religious family. Barron juxtaposes the language of Christian certainty (“Jesus came into my heart?” “Yup, all you have to do is ask!”) with a rampaging torrent of natural chaos. The theme put my hackles on alert: Was the author launching an easy, Americans-are-morons attack on spirituality? Yes and no. *Miracle* plays on several strings at once—so while Barron does mock magical thinking (pro tip: Do not tell a child that Jesus will protect her from a tornado), she also writes searching scenes about the terror underlying our little lives. Wry about religion, the play is nonetheless in contact with it, a hymn to the great god Accident.

We meet Gabriel (Danny Wolohan) and pregnant Carol (Danielle Skraastad) as they prepare for bed on Daniel Zimmerman's cozy, wood-timbered set—their evening ritual of prayer and botched chamomile tea painting a picture of earnest, slightly bumbling lives. Their timid five-year-old, Kayden (Ismenia Mendes), hunkers down with grandma Barbara (Caitlin O'Connell) as the wind rises outside, but really, what harm could it do? Gabriel and Carol's estranged, angry, pregnant daughter, Cynthia (the biblically named Susannah Flood), arrives to help, only to be stranded alongside them. And in short order, branches punch through the ceiling, garbage blows through the windows, a deer crashes into their car to fatally puncture their dog. As the storm rages, we realize disaster camaraderie has its own eternal dramaturgy: Noah's family may also have stayed up all night reminiscing about drier days, though they probably told fewer dirty stories about pickles.

Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks Festival has yet again found a play that no one else could produce: something odd and carefully made and disorienting. Barron has drawn wonderfully paradoxical characters, particularly Carol (a masochist who hates to be criticized) and Cynthia (a narcissist trying to be generous). But these destabilizing elements only increase our alienation; we're not drawn to them. Rather, by play's end, even the women's pregnant bellies seem frightening. Exquisitely rendered by Portia Krieger's production, the weather-minded *Miracle* functions atmospherically, establishing a sense of ongoing, endless menace. It's ruthlessly clever at taking us into the eye of the storm, which may be why I stumbled out afterward—not full of joy or grief, but certainly feeling like I hadn't breathed in ages.—*Theater review by Helen Shaw*



[Jun 25](#)

## [Julia Hochner on Gregory S. Moss's \*La Brea\*, part of Clubbed Thumb's SUMMERWORKS 2013](#)



David Wilson Barnes and Crystal Finn. Photo by Heather Phelps-Lipton

The good people at Clubbed Thumb have laid out a very clear mission statement for themselves: to create new work that is funny, strange and provocative. This has always been and continues to be an admirable and ambitious undertaking, and Gregory S. Moss's *La Brea* delivers on all three counts. Delightfully hilarious, certainly bizarre, and not without discomfort or darkness, it explores a rocky but loving sibling relationship (and a lot of other things too).

*La Brea* begins simply enough, with Leah (Rebecca Henderson) speaking a monologue to someone unseen or imaginary, or perhaps to the audience. Whoever her intended listener, she has us from the first moment. A grounded and immensely talented actor <https://www.blogger.com/null>, Ms. Henderson confides in us her habit/compulsion/love of stealing and the rush and pain it brings her. Despite the discomfiting subject matter, or perhaps because of it, Leah is immediately an empathetic, engaging character in all her dark complexity.

The play gets going shortly thereafter when Leah moves to Los Angeles to stay with her brother, who is not so successfully pursuing a career as an actor. Here we meet Steven (David Wilson Barnes), who is by turns artificially enthusiastic and belligerently pessimistic about the state of his life. Although his changes in mood are comically endearing, it soon becomes clear that these swings mask a deep-seated pain, which is exquisitely and subtly revealed by Mr. Barnes throughout the course of the play.

Despite this seemingly humble premise, *La Brea* is by no means a kitchen sink family drama. Much of the action swings to wild places, often verging on the absurd. In one scene, Leah and Steven go to a showing of an old Noir film, which is brilliantly, zanily reenacted by the three ensemble members (the excellent Bill Buell, Crystal Finn and Gabriel King) while Leah and Steven join us in the audience to watch. At one point, however, they get bored and take off, leaving us alone to view the "film" for a while – at which point one begins to wonder just what exactly is going on here! At another point, Steven has an extended dialogue with a mammoth preserved at the La Brea Tar Pits. The brilliance of Mr. Moss's writing, along with Adam Greenfield's deft direction, is that a scene so perplexing and silly can also be so full of humanity.

In the end, despite wandering to some very odd places, at the heart of *La Brea* is a touching, nuanced relationship between a brother and sister, which is explored and revealed both lovingly and painfully. What is perhaps most impacting about this play is that what makes Leah and Steven so compelling is just how flawed they are, how lost. Mr. Barnes has here conveyed all the frustration, insanity and love that comes along with being part of a family, whether that be one's own flesh and blood or the greater human family we all belong to. Perhaps the significance of the title is just that – the timelessness of all our funny, strange, provocative beauty.

*La Brea*

Written by **Gregory S. Moss**

Directed by **Adam Greenfield**

Performed by **Rebecca Henderson, Bill Buell, David Wilson Barnes, Gabriel King and Crystal Finn**

Scenic Designer **David Evans Morris**

Costume Designer **Sydney Maresca**

Lighting Designer **Gina Scherr**

Sound Designer **Shane Rettig**

Stage Manager **Sunny Stapleton**

[CLICK HERE FOR TICKETS](#)

June 20 – 29, at 8:00 PM (no show June 23rd)

PLEASE NOTE THAT THE SCHEDULE HAS CHANGED!

The Sunday, June 23rd performance has moved to Monday, June 24th at 8pm.

The Wild Project (195 E 3rd Street, between Avenues A and B)

Tickets \$18

Students \$15

## Theater review: La Brea

**Gregory S. Moss's sibling dramedy is the final offering in Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks series.**

By Jenna Scherer Fri Jun 28 2013



Photograph: Heather Phelps-Lipton

La Brea

**Time Out Ratings**

Rating: 4/5

**[The Wild Project](#)** (see [Off-Off Broadway](#)). By Gregory S. Moss. Directed by Adam Greenfield. With Rebecca Henderson, David Wilson Barnes, Bill Buell. Running time: 1hr 30mins. No intermission.

Words are not minced in *La Brea*, the new Gregory S. Moss play that rounds out Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks festival. "I cannot tell you what a hard-on I have for stealing," one of our protagonists deadpans to the audience in the play's opening moments, and it sets a tone: This is the story of people with issues, and whether they run from them or cuddle up real close.

Unrepentant kleptomaniac Leah (Henderson) has ditched her dead-end life in New Hampshire to move in with her brother, Steven (Barnes), a struggling actor whose career hasn't so much flamed out as it never took off. Broadly, the thirtyish siblings stand for the East Coast–West Coast divide: Leah is pragmatic and nostalgic, and Steven is aggressively optimistic and future-focused. Each thinks the other is in trouble, and each thinks he or she is the only one who can solve the other's problem.

Moss circles his chosen themes—the past versus the future, the idea of home, artificiality, aging, even incest—like a vulture, without settling on any one long enough to truly tease it apart. But *La Brea* is consistently funny and engaging wherever it alights, its humor biting and its ruminations shrewd.

Adam Greenfield's production too is fast-moving and stylized. Henderson and Barnes share a frantic screwball chemistry that also feels appropriately unhinged. As Leah and Steven go to pieces, so does the world around them; David Evans Morris's cardboard-and-velcro set cleverly comes apart alongside its inhabitants. When things get weird (talking woolly mammoths! agricultural film noir!), it doesn't feel like too far of a leap. *La Brea* doesn't get down as deep as it could, but it's never not fun—and that goes a long way.





## Memory Can Be a Sticky Swamp in *La Brea*

By [Jacob Gallagher-Ross](#) Wednesday, Jun 26 2013

Like the famous tar pits, [Gregory S. Moss's](#) *La Brea*—directed by [Adam Greenfield](#), part of Clubbed Thumb's 2013 Summerworks series—reminds us that memory can be a sticky swamp. And if you're not careful, it might swallow you.



Heather Phelps-Lipton

Like the famous tar pits, [Gregory S. Moss's](#) *La Brea*—directed by [Adam Greenfield](#), part of Clubbed Thumb's 2013 Summerworks series—reminds us that memory can be a sticky swamp. And if you're not careful, it might swallow you.

Leah ([Rebecca Henderson](#)), a compulsive kleptomaniac desperately nostalgic for a more secure home, comes to L.A. to stay with her brother, Steven ([David Wilson Barnes](#)). He's an aging actor, running on dream-fumes, still maniacally pursuing his big break. As the duo plays house, hints of taboo eroticism and familial recrimination fog the air (the apartment, a ramshackle cardboard construction, sheds its walls to indicate dissolving delusions). The bicoastal sibs suggest national allegory: the East Coast obsessed with a dream of the past; the West with an equally airy dream of the future.

Part examination of siblinghood's queasier side, part rueful meditation on fleeting time, part Hollywood satire, *La Brea*, like L.A. itself, tends to sprawl—but Moss's exquisite dialogue and imaginative flights more than carry you through. (The production's rendition of the forgotten cinematic genre of "farm noir" is bizarre brilliance.)

*La Brea* leaves its characters, and us, to ponder the difficult lesson of the swamps: How to escape fossilizing in regrets; how to imagine a future without obliterating the past.

## The War's Not Over: Home Is a Battleground 'Phoebe in Winter,' by Jen Silverman, at the Wild Project



Heather Phelps-Lipton, Jeanine Serralles in the play "Phoebe in Winter."

By RACHEL SALTZ

Published: June 11, 2013

The events in Jen Silverman's "Phoebe in Winter" happen in a time out of joint, when the world is in "a state of aftermath." A war has ended, fought in a jungle somewhere far-off. Or maybe it hasn't ended, and the field of battle is distressingly near — an explosion rumbles through the theater as the action begins.

Full of dislocations, "Phoebe in Winter," part of [Clubbed Thumb's](#) Summerworks series, has a fablelike quality. That comes in part from Ms. Silverman's language, which can be blunt and aphoristic. ("What should be has been replaced — forever, now — by what is.") And it comes from the Brechtian plot about power and class.

When the brothers Jeremiah (Christopher Ryan Grant) and Anther (Chris Myers) return from the war, longing for a winter meal of beast and peas, their peace is immediately interrupted. A young woman, machine gun in hand, bursts into the house and lays down a new set of rules.

She is Phoebe (Chinasa Ogbuagu), and she has come from the war, where she lost her brothers. So now she demands at gunpoint that Jeremiah and Anther be her brothers. And their father (Gerry Bamman) and servant, Boggett (Jeanine Serralles), must also assume new roles. "Look at what a fine and calm world we have made," Phoebe says of this strange new order, which suits some better than others. Yet the calm can't last.

Liam (Bobby Moreno), a third brother, straggles back from the war, dead — a gaping wound on his head. Soon battle lines are drawn within the family and the house. One camp commands the living room, the other a bedroom. More explosions.

[Ms. Silverman](#) mostly adheres to the rules she has set in motion, exploring the shifting dynamics of family and servant, family and intimate enemy. The play, though, teeters between being suggestive and being vague. (Even the set, by Jason Simms, seems stripped of telling details.) And that fablelike quality, which absolves "Phoebe in Winter" from any demands of realism, sometimes tips it over into abstraction or silliness.

But when it clicks, this 80-minute play, directed with a sure sense of pace by Mike Donahue (["Red-Handed Otter"](#)), is convincingly odd. Ms. Silverman has created a modern fairy tale, a little bad wolf whose lopsided grin reveals its crooked, bloody teeth.

"Phoebe in Winter" continues through Sunday at the Wild Project, 195 East Third Street, East Village; [clubbedthumb.org](#).

[Jun 13](#)

## [Olivia Jane Smith on Jen Silverman's \*Phoebe in Winter\*, part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks at The Wild Project](#)



Jeanine Serralles in *Phoebe in Winter*. Photo by Heather Phelps-Lipton

To say that *Phoebe in Winter* gives new meaning to the phrase "the war at home" seems as good a way as any to begin remarking on a play in which every other line comes out as a smartly put, hard-won truth you want to hold on to for later rumination. We should be forewarned that we're in for a wild ride when one such statement, toward the very beginning, informs us that "The world has become a smaller place; that makes it more dangerous." But it doesn't come close to preparing us for what follows in playwright Jen Silverman's swiftly tilting world of manipulation, alliances, betrayals, uprising and revolution--all inside one family's home.

In the generic, vaguely suburban-upper-middle-class living room of Jason Simms' set, patriarch Da Creedy (Gerry Bamman) and Boggett, the longtime maid (Jeanine Serralles) are anxiously awaiting the return home from war of the family's three brothers. Sweet, if agitated middle child Anther (Chris Myers) is quickly joined by the more swaggering Jeremiah (Christopher Ryan Grant). But where is youngest brother Liam, frets Boggett, who despite (or perhaps because of) never having ventured from the family domicile, seems like she is the one with the worst case of PTSD.

And that's before Phoebe (Chinasa Ogbuagu) bursts into the picture, wearing a Doors t-shirt and toting a rifle. In her first scene in particular, she sounds straight out of the Old Testament: "I came not to spread peace but the sword," she says, having enthroned herself in Da Creedy's chair. What she wants sounds simple enough. Jeremiah and Anther--or maybe it was others like them, who can tell in a war?--killed her three brothers. So now she's here to engage in a forcible family swap, adoption at gun-point. When someone points out that in Liam's absence, this family only has two brothers, she has an answer. Da Creedy will stand in for his youngest child and play the role of her third sibling. "What should be has been replaced forever by what is," Phoebe says of the loss of her actual family, in some unnamed jungle. "This is a world of inadequate replacements."

Going on the notion that "Things that are easily destroyed should be easily built," Phoebe talks her way into a real place in the family through sheer force of will and words. She fashions herself as the cherished "little sister," going so far as to put on earrings, though "queen," "empress," or "fascist dictator," would be just as appropriate. "The world has achieved shape and form because of Phoebe," one family member later observes. I'd wager the trains run on time too.

I don't want to give out too much about what transpires; it's a great tribute to Silverman's play that we don't have any idea where it's headed, and yet each development feels inevitable in the brutal universe she's created (and yes, observed). Phoebe in Winter will bring to mind Eugene Ionesco and Vaclav Havel in its overt political allegory and way it turns a mundane situation—a family together at home—completely on its head. Yet it never ceases entirely to be about, if not a specific, actual family, then families writ large, fraught all too often with their own power struggles, allegiances, and ganging up.



Chinasa Ogbuagu, Jeanine Serralles, Chris Myers, Gerry Bamman, and Christopher Ryan Grant in *Phoebe in Winter*. Photo by Heather Phelps-Lipton

At its very best, it's also highly personal. Written as archetypes more than individuals, the characters nevertheless have very specific relationships, and some have things they want from each other beyond grasping for power. Liam (Bobby Moreno), the more vulnerable (or "weak," depending on your perspective) youngest sibling, does eventually return, and some of the productions most affecting moments are ones in which he unburdens his heart. Not that he only has nice things to say. "You're worse," he tells Anther, bystander in the face of Jeremiah's bullying-turned-to-butchery. "Peace at any cost is never peace. It's just cost."

Simms' set has a forced, artificial quality, some of it necessitated by space constraints, that make it a perfect backdrop for the play's maniacal family feud. Lighting by Burke Brown and sound by Stowe Nelson help cover the transitions and create a visceral sense of bloodshed—it's over-the-top, but it works. (During one scene change, the menacing, rhythmic pulsing of the sound was so intense my every nerve cell was still vibrating when the lights came up, and a momentary silence rang in my ears before the next scene began.)

It's a credit to director Mike Donahue that the ensemble cast lend the right amount of humanity to characters that could, in different hands, become just players on a chess board, plotting their moves. He also keeps the play's tension building, landing every punch leading up to the final knockout image. As Boggett, Serralles stands out as a tightly wound ball of cut-throat longing and ambition.

It's Moreno, though, who is the play's heart. Thanks to his character, as written and performed, some of its more subtle and wrenching notions take shape, including the yearning for connection that love—familial or romantic—can provide in the face of a world that takes as readily as it gives. Is love the only acceptable provocation for violence, as well as the antidote to the inhumanity that stems from it? Is our best defense against oppression—both on the giving and receiving ends--to surrender our hearts? His performance makes these questions something we feel as much as think about.

### **Phoebe in Winter**

By **Jen Silverman**

Directed by **Mike Donohue**

featuring: **Gerry Bamman, Christopher Ryan Grant, Bobby Moreno, Chris Myers, Chinasa Ogbuagu and Jeanine Serralles**

scenic designer **Jason Simms**

costume designer **Kaye Voyce**

lighting designer **Burke Brown**

sound designer **Stowe Nelson**

stage manager **Devorah Jaffe**





## ***Phoebe in Winter***

**By Jen Silverman; Directed by Mike Donohue**

**Produced by Clubbed Thumb**

Off Off Broadway, New Play

Runs through 6.16.13

The Wild Project, 195 East 3 Street

by [Molly Marinik](#) on 6.11.13



Chinasa Ogbuagu, Jeanine Serralles, Chris Myers, Gerry Bamman, and Christopher Ryan Grant in *PHOEBE IN WINTER*. Photo by Heather Phelps-Lipton.

**BOTTOM LINE:** An eccentric, absurdist, metaphorical explosion.

Jen Silverman's *Phoebe in Winter* is one of those plays that contains so much nuance and color everyone has to be on the same page to reach maximum effect. It is to the credit of director Mike Donahue, and a clearly very smart cast and creative team, that this is accomplished in spades. Even though the script is a quagmire of meaning and complexity, everyone knows exactly what they are doing. And that is really fun for an audience to experience.

*Phoebe in Winter* is also one of those plays where you're pretty sure you're missing stuff. Because it's so odd, intentionally vague, and convoluted, I know moments and themes went over my head. But that doesn't really matter, because there is so much meaning embedded in the story that it would be impossible not to relate in some way, and it's more about the journey than the destination.

We enter the story with patriarch Da Creedy (Gerry Bamman) and his servant Boggett (Jeanine Serralles) discussing the joy of eating fruit out of season, apparently a rarity these days as we learn that a big war is ravaging the outside world. It seems dystopian, but mostly that's just inferred, as Da Creedy's sons return home one by one. Jeremiah (Christopher Ryan Grant) and Anther (Chris Myers) resume their familial roles while youngest brother Liam (Bobby Moreno) is conspicuously absent. Liam is Boggett's favorite, and she eagerly awaits his return. At this point, an unexpected visitor named Phoebe (Chinasa Ogbuagu) enters the house and proceeds to take her place in a family that is not her own. Phoebe lost her brothers in the war, and although she is on the other side of the battle, she's decided to join this family. Her personal arsenal of weapons means she has a lot of power in her new home.

Turns out she's not really a stranger, and there's a bit of a revenge thing going on. But when Phoebe joins the fam, everyone has to shuffle their roles. Boggett gets relegated to dog, though she's still in charge of the cooking and cleaning. Boggett finally convinces Phoebe to let her be Liam, and when Liam does return, they share the role of youngest brother. After some more juggling, Da Creedy takes Boggett's place, and he's obviously not thrilled about relinquishing his control within the family. Throughout the play, social stations are malleable and up for debate. And every time, it's the ones at the bottom who are most eager for change. No one wants to be the Boggett.

Silverman's absurdist, stylized language allows for a world in which familial relationships are turned upside down. Though never directly commenting on these people, she creates subtle inferences to social and political issues that are impactful without being preachy. You can look at this play as a study of violence, veterans' issues, women's rights, the culture of war, traditional family values, and a multitude of others. Silverman probably means to comment on all and none at the same time.

The performances in *Phoebe in Winter* are fantastically weird. There is a noticeable harmony on stage among the cast -- they look like they have been working together for ages though I doubt that's true. Jeanine Serralles, in particular, is a fascinating physical actor. She gives Boggett a presence that makes her utterly human and at the same time quirky enough to feel otherworldly. She communicates the comedy of the piece through every pore.

It's work like this -- unique, distinct, and somewhat experimental -- that makes Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks so essential. This ambitious production, with just a week-long run, includes a feast, several explosions, and three characters taking baths at various times (often with bubbles). What could seem unproducable on the page proves no problem for Clubbed Thumb, and the result is a highly engaging production with a lot of clever artistry behind it.

(*Phoebe in Winter* plays at The Wild Project, 195 East 3rd Street, as part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks Festival, through June 16, 2013. Remaining performances are June 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 at 8PM. Tickets are \$18 (\$15 for students/seniors) and can be at [clubbedthumb.org](http://clubbedthumb.org) or by calling 212 352 3101.)