Summerworks 2014: I'm Pretty Fucked Up Photograph: Daniel Terna / Posted: Tue Jun 17 2014


Ariel Stess's violently funny high-school comedy, I'm Pretty Fucked Up, is wrong on a lot of levels—all delicious, many disturbing. We find ourselves laughing at a campus in lockdown, with trench-coated teens prowling through the bushes and a security team on high alert. How dare we? This is the untouchably awful reality of our age, and Stess stomps gleefully around in it, kicking over genuine tragedies as though they're sand castles.

And then there's the parallel plot—three kids smoking bowl after bowl ("It's 4/20 man.") while driving recklessly thither and yon. This is our nation's youth! It's so wrong to giggle! Yet somehow we're not depressed when spacey Isabel (Lauren Annunziata), blithe Jared (Ben Hollandsworth) and dorky sweetheart Dan (Seth Clayton) cut class, grab Taco Bell and generally make terrible decisions. Our happiness for them isn't just a contact high from their joy at playing hooky. They are Ferris Buellers in a less innocent age: Their "day off" may be saving their lives.

One of the comic joys here feels long in coming. Finally, Danny Wolohan has a role that puts his gifts center-stage. Wolohan, an anarchic wild card in shows like The Patron Saint of Sea Monsters and An Octoroon, is the kind of clown Shakespeare wrote for; in fact, his baffled bumpkin security guard could be a long-descended cousin of Much Ado About Nothing's Dogberry. Wolohan's creation is a masterpiece of detail, down to his very sad, deeply ridiculous Steven Seagal ponytail; Fucked Up is worth seeing for his performance alone.

Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks Festival fields another tremendous production—exquisitely cast, cleverly designed and directed with warmth and ease by Kip Fagan—but first-among-equals here is Stess's script. Her characterizations depend on juxtaposing adolescent behavior with formal, grown-up clichés: teenagers who, after getting called out for using gendered language, apologize. "I don't know where it started. But I want to find out. I just have to find the right literature on it."

And so-called adults aren't exempt, first trembling with immaturity and then collapsing into verbal tics and autopilot banalities. The frequent PA interruptions from principal Leonard (Colleen Werthmann) are small masterpieces of flustered misinformation—"Not to worry!" she squeaks, after telling her staff to shelter in place.

Stess and Fagan somehow create an unsafe space (one audience member had a bomb planted at his feet, which understandably gave him the twitches) that's still safe for comedy. They use our own alarmist tendencies against us; when a boy falls asleep after getting a concussion, you can feel the room lean forward, vibrating with in loco parentis anxiety. For the full 90 minutes, laughs are startled out of you, with the shock of transgression expertly orchestrated with stretches of sublime teenage idiocy. It's sweet and wicked satire in the Horatian mode: We can look at what frightens us when we're laughing at it. Horace, granted, spent less time worrying about whether or not his characters were learning their Spanish vocabulary and how to get out of gym class. But, um, those things are important, Horace. Ignoring them? That's pretty fucked up. —Theater review by Helen Shaw
I'm Pretty Fucked Up

By Ariel Stess; Directed by Kip Fagan Produced by Clubbed Thumb

by Molly Marinik on 6.20.14

BOTTOM LINE: An astute look at adolescence that's particularly nostalgic for anyone who attended high school in the late '90s.

Ah the polarity of adolescence. It can be totally awesome, like when you're ditching class to smoke weed on a beautiful day with your friends. Or it can be quite the opposite, like when you're locked in a classroom while a school shooter roams loose on the campus grounds. Ariel Strauss explores this dichotomy in I'm Pretty Fucked Up.

I'm a big fan of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks series. Their productions are extremely quirky, but always because they are unapologetically human. I'm Pretty Fucked Up puts high school under the lens, and it does so to great comic effect. With a soundtrack that includes Oasis and Bob Dylan (with a pre-show set list including Bush and Gin Blossoms) those who came of age in a world of flip phones will feel right at home.

Evoking teenage stoner movies like Dazed and Confused and Garden State, I'm Pretty Fucked Up follows three friends who ditch school early in the day to drive around smoking pot. Isabel (Lauren Annunziata), Jared (Ben Hollandsworth), and Dan (Seth Clayton) are also high on life. They talk about their hookups, devour Taco Bell, and feel utterly invincible. They recall that unbridled joy and optimism that only someone years removed from adolescence can truly understand. Ugh, it really WAS so easy then.

Back at the school, a security guard (Danny Wolohan) leaps into action when the lockdown alarm is sounded. Reports of a shooter on campus send everyone into a tizzy, including his crush, the school's Spanish teacher (Ana Nogueria). In her classroom, under the desk for safety, are indifferent students and brand-new couple June (Bonnie White) and Bobby (Alexander Flores). While tears stream down their teacher's face and the security guard's PTSD from a previous
school shooting gives him action-hero adrenaline, June and Bobby seem rather unfazed, happy instead to just be in each other's presence.

As the play bounces from the car to the classroom, from joyride to nightmare, a picture of adolescence begins to emerge. Dangerous behavior pervades both scenarios (the kids are reckless and the adults are trapped), and when the violence is over, the bumbling principal (Colleen Werthmann) addresses the school, admitting that it was all handled pretty poorly from the administration's end. It appears that everyone was pretty fucked indeed.

*I'm Pretty Fucked Up* maintains a suspenseful through-line, what with a trigger-happy security guard looking for vengeance from last year's shooting, and ample use of smoke and explosions to signify the impending danger on campus. That said, the production walks the line between thriller and satire: it's very much a comedy and any subsequent fear is confined strictly to the stage. Director Kip Fagan maintains a light tone which makes the adults' reactions seem overblown by comparison. Even the violent offenders don't seem particularly effusive. Yet, it's the security guard's story, and Wolohan steals the show with his amped-up commitment to his job.

The play packs in a lot of points of view, and not always with adequate explanation to streamline the narrative. The plot gets mired in its nostalgia, and while insanely entertaining for those in the right demographic, it sometimes does so at the expense of clarifying the action (as an example, the previous school shooting responsible for the security guard's PTSD gets way more exposition than the events of this particular day ever do). But at a tight 80 minutes, this quick paced comedy will transport you right back to high school, and remind you just how remarkable it is that anyone makes it out alive. And this incredibly likable cast will make you feel like you're back home in suburban wherever-you're-from.

*I'm Pretty Fucked Up* plays at The Wild Project, 195 East 3rd Street, through June 22, 2014.
All the characters in Ariel Stess’ new play, *I'm Pretty Fucked Up*, are...well... pretty fucked up. Signs and symptoms abound: smoking too much weed, PTSD after witnessing a school shooting, a pervasive anger at their high school classmates. Set in the suburbs of New Mexico, Stess’ script jumps back and forth between a high school on lockdown and a group of three teenagers who cut class to depart on an impromptu pot fueled road trip. The action around the shooter unfurls inside a classroom; three students skipping class are in a car. The stage is divided to mark the dueling plot lines that run parallel until the very end. Most of the scenes unfold in these tight claustrophobic spaces, yet it is in these cramped spaces that the most poignant, funny, and tender moments reveal themselves.

These vignettes beautifully and honestly illustrate the fragile emotions that are so heightened in high school. As Jared (Ben Hollandsworth), Dan (Seth Clayton) and Isabel (Lauren Annunziata) smoke bowls, eat Taco Bell, and belt Oasis, nothing much ‘happens’. Dan and Isabel confess to liking each other. Jared and Isabel confess to killing Dan’s gerbil. And we confess to finding all that engaging and engrossing. Yet the juxtaposition with the extremity of a school on lockdown feels at odds. Although the two plots converge, their different emotional registers do not match up.

Despite varying emotional registers, every character feels utterly alive and real—fucked up, but palpable nonetheless. Director Kip Fagan’s succeeds best in the bits of dialogue, the moments of silence and physicality, and the connections that are forged like lightning bolts between the characters. *I'm Pretty Fucked Up* mixes the banal and the horrific, though in the universe of the play, sometimes you can’t tell which is which.
Clubbed Thumb concludes this year’s Summerworks with Peggy Stafford’s *16 Words or Less* (playing thru July 5th at the Wild Project). Like its mission statement, this play is certainly funny, strange and provocative.

Bizarre things occur every time the phone rings at My Fair Lilac, the quaint Park Slope flower shop where Crystal (Crystal Finn) works. Jonathan (Neal Huff), a strange man with enviable hair growth powers, wants to send his somewhat estranged mother (Caitlin O’Connell) flowers after his father dies. He enlists Crystal with the task of editing his lengthy condolence note to conform with the shop’s somewhat-strict limit of 16 words or less. Meanwhile Nick at Cancer Care (Clayton Dean Smith) aggressively reminds Crystal of her commitment to cut her hair for the cancer kids. The teenaged Karen Carly (Jessica Rothe) wants to send her Bubi (Mia Katigbak) condolence flowers after the blood-soaked cancerous death of Peanut the cat. And Jonathan’s oncologist/theater director ex-wife Jenny (a marvelous Donnetta Lavinia Grays) performs Crystal’s mastectomy while flirting with the idea of possessing a troll-like figurine. Like the tulips Crystal sells at My Fair Lilac, each character blooms in full, intrinsically tied to Crystal’s loneliness.

Stafford isn’t afraid to tackle the thorny painful subject of cancer with comedy. Indeed so much of life’s tragedies are best dealt with humor and pathos and so it is with *16 Words or Less*. Portia Krieger directs this rapid-fire dark comedy with fervent energy, keeping movement tight and precise within the confines of Daniel Zimmerman’s claustrophobic flower shop. The performers masterfully tackle Stafford’s language with an easeful grace. Melodic phrases are repeated, morphed and teased with symphonic playfulness. And time, that tricky amorphous thing, is stretched and pulled like Play-Doh as the plot unspools before us. In fact, it seems as if years pass like seconds on the stage as Crystal cuts and grows her hair, as Jonathan’s beard gets longer and longer, as Nick at Cancer Care and Karen Carly battle crystal meth addictions, as Bubi amasses sex toys and a sun-tanned lover, as Jenny flirts with Crystal’s disaster. So much occurs and yet the play is a brisk 75 minutes. Time truly does fly while you’re having fun and *16 Words or Less* is wildly fun.
16 Words or Less

By Peggy Stafford; Directed by Portia Krieger Produced by Clubbed Thumb
by Molly Marinik on 7.1.14

BOTTOM LINE: A quirky comedy about why we live even though we’re eventually just going to die.

What if Little Shop of Horrors was a lyrical play about the inevitability of death and the existential limitations of life by default? What if instead of a homicidal plant, Audrey II was an omnipresent threat of impending demise?

Though actually not at all similar to Little Shop of Horrors (thanks for indulging me though), there is something worth noting about an urban flower shop -- mundane yet hopeful -- and this is the heart of 16 Words or Less. What transpires in this play is a lovely metaphorical adventure through the life of the store's employee Crystal (Crystal Finn) coming to terms with growth and change in a world full of inevitable death.

Surrounding Crystal are customers, acquaintances, doctors, and others who drift in and out of her day. Mostly via the phone on the flower shop desk, Crystal interacts with these people in various ways. Sometimes it's business -- taking an order for a flower delivery; sometimes it's personal -- talking to doctors about a recent breast cancer diagnosis. Six actors (Neal Huff, Clayton Dean Smith, Caitlin O’Connell, Jessica Rothe, Donnetta Lavinia Grays, and Mia Katigbak) nimbly portray various characters in Crystal’s life, often assembling into a telephonic Greek chorus of sorts.

Rhythm is a big part of this play, and between Peggy Stafford's expressive words and Portia Krieger's perfectly timed direction, the production maintains a heartbeat that ticks steadily on. Stafford’s use of the absurd also contributes to this theatricalized world. Krieger and cast place a thoughtful sincerity on the silly life situations that remind us that we really shouldn’t take it all too seriously. From a bone-broth diet that generates hair growth, to a grandmother getting
knocked up, to an on-the-spot mastectomy, this world remains unpredictable.

Daniel Zimmerman’s clean set design shows the flower shop center stage, with three of the four walls opened to allow seamless movement in and out of the store. Along each side wall are corded telephones, used consistently as “the outside world” with which Crystal conducts business.

“16 words or less” refers to the amount of words the flower shop allows customers to include in written cards, and just how hard it is to fully express a depth of feeling within that limitation. Stafford uses repetition to create a symphonic landscape of the aphorisms we hear on repeat when something bad happens in our lives. “I’m sorry for your loss” is uttered many times throughout the play. The number 16 transforms from words to years to days left to live.

As Crystal observes others’ life changes, noting the transformations occurring all around her, she finds the strength within herself to not just settle for the status quo. At first merely willing to cut her long hair as a donation to the cancer center, by the play’s end Crystal has begun a relationship and found better employment. We are optimistically reminded that the end isn’t here until it is.

*16 Words or Less* plays at The Wild Project, 195 3rd Avenue, through July 5, 2014.
Peggy Stafford’s *16 Words or Less* is a delicately loopy play—loopy in two senses, both structurally and tonally. Both the writing and the actors (directed with a light touch by Portia Krieger) show a gentle screwball wit that pops out in moments that mix absurdity with emotional grounding: the array of doctors weighing in on problems large and small, the officious cancer-care worker and earnestly self-absorbed cheerleader, the recurring games of “Jinx.” In its construction, the piece also loops back on itself constantly; moments and phrases recur and echo, pieces of language and fragments of events and characters’ obsessions return, in a way that is both wry and oddly haunting.

One of these recurrent patterns is the refrain of “16 words or less”—the arbitrary word limit set by flower shop My Fair Lilac for the cards that accompany its bouquets. (Like many other tropes in the piece—hair, mothers, birds-nest material, cancer—the number 16 also pops up in other ways: the number of questions on a form; the number of days a character’s father has to live; the age of another character.) Crystal, the flower-shop clerk, feels the need to hold the line and respect this rule, but she also wants to accommodate the customers who call and stop by, trying to negotiate ambiguous and complex emotional situations with the prop of flowers and only a few words to express their feelings in: people like Jonathan, whose father has died and who wants to send flowers to his mother even though his parents were long divorced, or Karen Carly, a cheerleader who doesn’t know how else to reach out to a grandmother mourning the loss of a decrepit, aged cat.

Crystal feels like she’s stuck standing still while everyone around her transforms—re-finding their old selves or moving in new directions. She’s paralyzed by a single decision: whether to cut off her long hair and donate it to Cancer Care (employer of the self-righteous Nick). She enforces that sixteen-word limit because she sees the importance of order and structure, yet she’s also easily drawn in by the events and emotional needs of people around her. Yet she is in fact going through a lot, without perhaps the perspective to see it: over the course of the play, she caroms from serious illness to an unexpected marriage; from complications in that marriage to romantic overtures from unexpected directions; from a terrible accident to a new beginning. She becomes involved in ongoing situations in Jonathan’s family (his loss of his father, his recent divorce) and of Karen Carly’s grandmother—and is somehow even drawn in to the complexities of Nick’s life. She’s beset by doctors and customers and the ever-ringing phone, and sometimes she just wants her hair back.

And all of it is done with a delicate touch and delight in the weird nuances of character. The actors all seem to find not just humor but joy in these characters: Clayton Dean Smith’s oily indignance as Nick; Crystal Finn’s striving for equanimity as Crystal; Jessica Rothe, as Karen Carly, proudly reciting her haiku; Mia Katigbak as Karen Carly’s Bubi (grandmother), finding herself anew in a hamentaschen cookie. (The entire ensemble is very good, but Rothe is something special, filling the blithe cockiness and self-centeredness of an adolescent girl with sincerity and sweetness.)

Stafford uses language almost like literal threads of color that run through the fabric of the play—and, in a fanciful way, there’s something about the use of space (Daniel Zimmerman’s set, with a flower shop in its square central playing area and wall phones lining the perimeter of the space at measured intervals, as well as the physical patterns of entrances and exits) that makes the movement through the whole piece feel like the
shuttling of a loom or the weaving of intricate lace.

The play negotiates a complicated balance between change and stasis, between balance and discordance, between progress and regression. The flower shop becomes a plant shop and then a strange hair therapy center. Characters soldier on through cancer and drug addiction and divorce and grief—and celebrate marriages and births and getting off drugs—but somehow keep their core sense of self, and retain a fragile optimism as they move on into the unknown. As Bubi says, “What is, is”: they can’t escape themselves and so they must try, over and over, to transform themselves—but also to embrace themselves.