



New Jersey by Bob Rendell

### Nocturne Proves A Rewarding Theatrical Exercise at Luna Stage

A simple and tragic story. In Adam Rapp's *Nocturne*, a 32-year-old struggling novelist tells us the story of his life over the past 15 years beginning with the fateful day when he was 17 and his brakes failed, causing him to run over and kill his 10-year-old sister. From that moment forward, normalcy and tranquility, and even sanity, are forever banished from the lives of each member of his Midwestern suburban family. The play reminds us how an inexplicable event can occur without any warning and forever alter the course of our lives.

As the story is being told by a novelist, it is not inappropriate that he narrates in a kind of very dark story theatre fashion. Under the imaginative direction of Juan Souki, this Luna Stage production of *Nocturne* has a perverse, haunting quality. Although it was originally staged at the ART in Cambridge in 2000 and has since been seen in New York, it feels like an organic collaboration between Souki and author Rapp.

Luna Stage usually performs in a 90-seat theatre. However, director Souki has installed this production in a second, 40-seat black box-like space. And I say "installed" deliberately as the production has the feel of a three dimensional installation at MOMA. When we enter the theatre, two adult actresses are on stage. One (identified in the program as *The Redheaded Girl*) is playing a tinkly little tune on a piano which is set against the wall to our left in a far corner. I do not describe it as upstage right because there is nothing to distinguish the playing area from the area where the audience is seated. In fact, I had the feeling that ideally Souki would have used the entire room for his installation and placed the audience in scattered areas throughout. The other woman (identified as *The Sister*) has her hair in braids and is clothed in a little girl's white, flowered dress. She flounces about the space in a childlike manner and lies on the floor with her box of crayons drawing. Balloons are placed about the area, and protruding from the side walls are bits of various furniture and fixtures, including the wheel portion of a bicycle, all of which would commonly be found in a home with children. This continues for an extended period until the lights dim and the women leave the stage, and the play begins.

Two adult males enter. Confusingly, one of the actors (Cary Gant) is identified in the program as *Man 1, The Father*. The other (Oliver Henzler) as *Man 2, The Son*.

However, the actors share the role of the son. "Man 1" gets the lion's share of his narration. However, when the father appears, "Man 1" embodies him while "Man 2" remains the writer narrating the words that pass between them. From them, we learn about the accident and its horrible consequences to both his mother and father as well as to himself.

Why do two actors play the young man? My best guess (and I make it without surety) is that, for the most part, the more mature appearing Man 1, who has the bulk of the narration, is the writer remembering his past. Whereas the younger looking Man 2 represents the writer during that past. This view is re-enforced by the performances. Cary Gant as Man 1 displays the gift of a natural storyteller. Gant's deep, soothing and resonant voice, and the smooth rhythm of his speech inexorably draw us into his orbit. On the other hand, Oliver Henzler shows us the young man's nervous insecurity, projecting the awkwardness and vulnerability of someone whose wings have been shattered.

The second act begins with the story of the young man's early years in New York's East Village where he finds some solace in his anonymity, and his exposure to good literature brings out his own literary bent. It is narrated by the actresses identified as The Redheaded Girl and The Sister. Along the way, The Red Headed Girl will turn out to be an actress from Michigan who meets the young man and comes to play a meaningful role in his life. However, there is no discernible internal rationale for either actress to assume narrator status here. Lindsey Beeman brings a lively and likeable upbeat quality to both her narration and her role as the actress from Michigan. Sistina Giordino keeps up the pace as assistant narrator here, and makes no false moves as the image haunting the young man.

The final scenes depict the writer's visit to his dying, cancer-stricken father who is decaying in a ramshackle apartment. Although the writer gains a better understanding of his father during his final hours, there is no catharsis here. Neither is there any upbeat message about maturing and overcoming one's demons. At the end, the writer remains extremely crippled by his demons, and appears likely to remain so despite whatever accommodations with his existence he has made and will continue to make. With this conclusion, author Adam Rapp (whose *Red Winter Light* had a well received five month run off-Broadway last year) has presented us with a deeper and more profound vision than we are accustomed to seeing.

Jian Jung's intriguing set is perfectly attuned to director Juan Souki's haunting vision. There is a moment that exemplifies this. The haunted young man sees visions (corporeal to us) of his dead sister. To depict one such vision, two large windows open in the black wall behind the actors. From the darkened street outside, we see the sad, forlorn face and figure of The Sister peering into her brother's room. It may be just a look outside the glass fronted building housing Luna Stage, but it is a haunting effect from Souki and Jung which brings us a visceral chill.

Adam Rapp has had six published novels. It is impossible to watch *Nocturne* without at least wondering to what extent, if any, autobiographical material is present here. There may be a hint in the script. The dying father compliments his son on his one published book, and then wants to discuss the effect of his sister's death on him as described in the book. His son immediately cuts him off from any such discussion by saying, "It's a novel, Dad". However, whatever the case may be here, this is only one of many intriguing thoughts raised by this unusual and worthy production.