



There's poetry in touching 'Nocturne' script

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NEW JERSEY STAGE

We've all driven 45 in a 30 m.p.h. zone.

So did the teenager who's simply called The Son in Adam Rapp's "Nocturne."

He, though, died for our sins.

In the taut, elegiac production at Luna Stage in Montclair, Rapp tells us The Son's sad tale. The boy was driving home from his summer job, just moments from the suburban Illinois home he shared with his parents. Then his Buick Electra wouldn't stop. Later, investigators found that the car's brake line snapped.

The tragedy is that while he was desperately trying to stop the car, a girl ran into the street and was hit and killed by it.

She was The Son's nine-year-old sister.

The accident affects their mother and father in markedly different ways. Rapp details the pain of the first meeting that The Son has with each parent. The one with the father is so harrowing that the kid leaves home. Moving away geographically, however, cannot distance himself from his problem. Now it's 15 years after the "involuntary manslaughter," and no family member has partially recovered, let alone fully.

Rapp wrote the script in 2001 as a 90-minute stream-of-consciousness monologue. Luna's director, Juan Souki, saw more of a play in it, so he split the dialogue among four characters, added an intermission, and expanded it to a two-hour show.

Playing The Son are both Oliver Henzler, a white man, and a black man named Cary Gant (yes, Cary Gant -- not Cary Grant). Sometimes they say lines together, and sometimes they alternate. This device doesn't inherently help the play, for it makes The Son seem more like a symbol than a real person.

What's more damaging is that Gant isn't secure in his lines. There's an elegance and beauty to Rapp's writing; witness "Grief does not expire like a candle, or a beacon in a lighthouse." The playwright seems to choose every word carefully for its poetic weight, so when Gant stumbles on a word or repeats one he didn't say clearly, he impedes the flow and ruptures the rhythm.

The strong-jawed Henzler does substantially better, as he recounts the tale with great emotion, imbuing it with inconsolable sorrow.

In the second act, two women take most of the dialogue. One is "The Redheaded Girl," sharply played by Lindsey Beeman. She's the woman who comes into The Son's life and tries to soothe his wounds. The other is The Sister, dressed in a little girl's white party dress, frilly yellow socks and Mary Janes. She's so well portrayed by Sistina Giordano that an audience might almost forget that she actually isn't a kid.

Near play's end, Gant redeems himself, for he plays The Son's father, as the two meet again after a long absence. What Rapp asks the actor to do isn't easy to accomplish, but Gant achieves it with grace. Here, too, Henzler gets a chance to smile with unrestrained glee. The effect, after 100 minutes of seeing pain in his face, is both shocking and welcome.

When a production doesn't offer much in the way of sets and costumes, the brunt falls on the lighting designer to create the mood. Carrie Yacono creates a fascinating chiaroscuro world. Director Souki, though, does have one arresting visual trick that manages to bring Bloomfield Avenue into the play.

Rapp's bio in the program says he's written seven novels. Truth to tell, "Nocturne" has such rich language that Rapp may have done better to craft this script as a novel, too. That way, a reader could have taken his time in savoring every line. Even in this medium, each is worth hearing.