

A Taste Of The Fringe In Early Summer: New City Stage Presents Two Sam Shepard Shorts

Written by Christopher Munden

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The Edinburgh Fringe Festival receives hundreds of applications from American drama troupes every year. Philadelphia's New City Stage Company is in talks to become one of those selected to travel to Scotland, transporting a production it premiered last year at the Philly Fringe, a festival inspired by the Scottish counterpart. The company's *SAVAGE/LOVE & TONGUES*, a one-man performance of two twenty-minute poetic dramas by that most American of playwrights, Sam Shepard, is an ideal candidate.

Each is a captivating exploration of an essential human experience. *SAVAGE/LOVE*, the stronger of the two shorts, focuses on the many aspects of romantic love, from absence to fulfillment, demonstrating how one person can oscillate wildly in thoughts on the subject.

Shepard is interested in the personas we project within or to obtain a relationship. The narrator recounts all the things he has done for his lover, then reveals that he has not yet met her. I was reminded of a line from F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night*, when the protagonist is sitting on a train examining his life right back to the childhood time he put a dime in the church collection instead of a nickel, and realizes it has all been lived to impress women.

The "performance" doesn't end when we've found someone. "Now we're acting the partners in love," says the narrator. "Now we're acting the estrangement/ Now we're acting the reconciliation/ Now we're acting that the reconciliation was a success." And later: "Now I feel nothing."

The monologue is packed with such gems as "you played me your favorite music, I couldn't hear the music in it." Though there's much poetry in the language, it is also rich theatrical drama. And though Shepard's thoughts on love are savage, there are nuggets of hope. In the end "even though we see it's a hoax, we agree to continue."

The second short, *TONGUES*, deals with a subject that is dark *prima facie*: death. A dying man looks back on his life. Shepard is again interested in our different perspectives, this time on reminiscence and reflections on mortality.

Possessing a face branded by strength and intensity and a powerful stage presence, Russ Widdall was born to act Sam Shepard. These are plays focused on language and character, and Widdall's range and control illuminate texts dense in meaning and insight but light in narrative.

The whole production is simply staged, though technically complex. Sparse, beat-poetry style drumming (Josh Fox, soundscape by Ren Manley) complements Widdall's speech. Intricate lighting cues (restaged by Matt Sharp) communicate the changing perspectives. In SAVAGE/LOVE, original director Ryder Thornton and restager Ginger Dayle use positioning to cue tonal shifts. In TONGUES, costume designer Amy Chmielewski dresses Widdall in a cowboy shirt pieced together of several designs, representing the many sides of one man.

On opening night, the audience was treated to free drinks during an 11pm performance. With a rowdy audience and unusual start time, the performance reminded me of the best of fringe festivals past and made me long for those to come.

SAVAGE/LOVE & TONGUES

By Sam Shepard

Restaged by Ginger Dayle

May 26-June 3, 2012

New City Stage Company

at the Adrienne Theater Second Stage

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Philadelphia, PA

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