

Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA)

December 14, 2009

Fine cast brings 'Red Ryder' back

Author: Wendy Rosenfield FOR THE INQUIRER

Edition: CITY-C

Section: FEATURES MAGAZINE

Page: D04

Index Terms:

REVIEW

THEATER

Estimated printed pages: 2

Article Text:

You can always count on New City Stage Company to produce plays unafraid to expose the underside of sexual politics and emotional warfare. Mark Medoff's 1973 Obie-winning *When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?*, playing at the Adrienne Theatre, is no exception.

Adapted for the screen in 1979, the play examines the tectonic shift that occurred in roadside America from the start of the Vietnam War to its messy conclusion. Sort of a sequel to William Inge's *Bus Stop*, the action occurs inside a New Mexico rest stop and diner that's in the final throes of a battle with a new highway bypass.

At the diner, young Stephen (Robert DaPonte) still rebels without a cause wearing a D.A. hairstyle and pegged jeans, as Angel (Maria Panvini) wipes down tables and measures out her loneliness in coffee spoons and doughnuts. Miserly boss Clark (Bill Rahill) counts his pennies and snarls, and filling station owner Lyle (Buck Schirner) stops in occasionally to drop off some homespun wisdom. A freeze-dried wealthy couple, Clarisse (Karen Peakes) and Richard (Brian McCann), perch on stools before passing through.

This diorama is shattered by the appearance of Teddy (Russ Widdall), an unbalanced Vietnam vet, and Cheryl (Melissa Lynch), the kind of dead-eyed hippie chick who, if she hadn't hooked up with Teddy, probably would have ended up at the Spahn Ranch. Needless to say, things get freaky, and everything changes, except when it doesn't.

Director Michael Brophy got himself a winner of a cast. Widdall tears through his performance with the kind of unpredictable menace that characterizes Teddy's onstage spiritual brethren (Lee, the drifter of

Sam Shepard's True West, comes to mind) at their most frightening. And yet Brophy allows Widdall to leave enough oxygen in the room for the rest of the actors to breathe freely. Lynch, in particular, with few lines, manages to express a potent mixture of fear, boredom, and disgust, and DaPonte chafes with impotence and frustration. Brophy also leavens the mix with enough humor to keep it from becoming a tiresome rant.

When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder? is itself a bit of an anachronism. There aren't many in New City Stage's audience who will get the title's reference (Red Ryder was a fictional radio, film, and television cowboy in the 1940s), and these days, there's not much news in Teddy's unwelcome message that cowboys generally don't ride in to save the day, or that the nation is headed for an era of disillusionment and reckoning. Still, the careful way people forge their identities doesn't really change all that much, and the catharsis of watching those identities crumble is as timeless as theater itself.

When You Comin' Back, Red Ryder?

Playing at: Adrienne Theatre Mainstage, 2030 Sansom St., Philadelphia. Through Jan. 10. Tickets: \$18 to \$22. Information: 215-563-7500 or www.NewCityStage.org.

Memo:

Review: Theater

Copyright (c) 2009 The Philadelphia Inquirer
Record Number: 7008216720