

Sparrow Grass

Trinity Repertory Company has a penchant for thinking outside of the box, for trying things that are new or unexpected. The folks at Trinity seem to like to shake things up a bit, often with success and audience approval. This season, they are presenting a “theatrical event” called Three by Three, with three original plays performed in rotating repertory on the Dowling stage.



Sparrow Grass, which just opened, is the first of these world premieres. Sitting through it, though, you may feel that you are watching all three plays at once, crammed into one. In fact, there are about five or six different plays fighting for supremacy of this one script.

Simply put, it’s the story of a family who, under a façade of civility and perfection, are really, really screwed up. At play’s opening, Paula, her maid Isabelle and daughter Teddie are awaiting the arrival of the “Colonel,” Paula’s husband who has been serving in a war. At the same time, the prodigal son, Nate, unexpectedly reappears on the scene. The feeling that things are not going to go well is prophetic as the you-know-what slowly and spectacularly hits the fan.

Playwright Curt Columbus throws so much at the fan that it ends up a big mess. Is it a son-father revenge play? A family drama? An anti-war play? A steamy potboiler featuring lots of incest? Is it about the ravages of war? Loss of identity? The darkness underneath the “perfect” family? Likely, it’s all of the above. According to the director notes, it’s a modern retelling of the Phaedra myth, about a mother’s forbidden passion for her stepson. With so much else going on, and so much that is more interesting, the mother-stepson romance just seems superfluous. There are more nuanced and effective ways than this to comment on the state of the family in our society.

Eventually, by the time things got loud and violent, I had stopped caring. And stopped wondering what would, in the end, happen to these people. It’s hard to discern who to root for or to know whose story this really is we’re watching. It’s not helped by the fact that the play is schizophrenic, bouncing back and forth between stories and plotlines, leaving lots of dangling threads unexplained.

Truly, the stellar cast deserved better. Having never seen him in a lead role before, Richard Donnelly was impressive as Ralph, the “Colonel,” who I kept wishing the play was really about. The story of a war veteran, coming home to face what he’s done, dealing with the loss of identity and perhaps the loss of his own mind, would have been a far better play. Phyllis Kay, as Paula, was equally brilliant. Her scenes

with Donnelly are great, they have wonderful chemistry together.

Unfortunately, the rest of the cast are mostly wasted. Barbara Meek and Jaime Rosenstein play the stereotypical sassy black maid and angst-ridden teenager, respectively. Tyler Lansing Weaks spends the bulk of the play with no shirt on, most of the time for no reason. His character, Nate, is either maniacal and devious, or he's completely insane. Like many aspects of these characters, we never get to really understand what's going on deep down inside, underneath the surface. That, like much of the play, is an unfortunate missed opportunity.

Sparrow Grass runs through May 13 at Trinity Repertory Company.

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