

RISE's Hill House Keeps Audiences on Edge

Shirley Jackson's gothic horror novel, *The Haunting of Hill House*, is considered one of the best ghost stories published in the 20th century. Jackson was inspired after reading the reports of a group of psychic researchers' study of a supposedly haunted house. It was not, however, the paranormal happenings the researchers described, but the researchers themselves and their differing backgrounds and motivations. This is what sets *Hill House* apart. The terror does not come from the house; it comes from the characters' psyches. In fact, it is not always clear whether phenomena is actually happening or is all in the characters' heads. This ingenuity may be why it has been adapted into two films, two plays and, most recently, a Netflix series.



For this Halloween season, RISE is keeping audiences on edge with its production of F. Andrew Leslie's 1964 stage adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House*, directed by Emily Tallman (who, incidentally, writes horror novels herself).

The first thing the audience will notice is the abundance of doors, and not just on the stage, but in rows on either side of the audience as well, as though we are in a large corridor of Hill House. These doors prove instrumental in creating the paranormal effects (along with the lighting design by Gordon Dell), insinuating the sound of mysterious knocking approaching our terrified protagonists, until the ghosts are banging on their bedroom door hard enough to shake the entire room. Central to the set (designed and constructed by Derek Laurendeau, Lenny Schwartz, Pat Ferron and Emily Tallman) is the parlor, where the investigators most often parlay. It's pretty much Haunted House 101, with old books, a chess set, a bearskin rug and unsettling portraits (though only one is visible, with the rest implied to be on the imagined fourth wall). Off to one side is a mysterious locked door, leading to a stone tower that looks like something out of Hogwarts.

We first meet Eleanor Vance (Erica Strickland), a timid young woman who has spent her entire adult life taking care of her ailing mother up until her death three months ago. She is ushered into the parlor by the house's comically stern and solemn caretaker, Mrs. Dudley (Constance Almonte). She repeatedly reminds the new tenants that she is not there to wait on them and that she does not stay the night, so with no town for six miles, no one will hear them scream. Probably great fun at parties, that one. The characters' main source of amusement is imitating her oft-repeated phrases.

Eleanor is soon joined by Theodora (Samantha Acampora), her sarcastic and bolder foil. The two hit it off, declaring themselves “long-lost cousins.” It turns out both were summoned to the house because both have experiences with the paranormal; Eleanor survived a poltergeist attack as a child and Theodora has extra-sensory perception. They are to assist Dr. Montague (Tom Morey) in studying the alleged paranormal forces within the house. Accompanying them is Luke Sanderson (Nicholas Tvaroha), the young nephew of the house’s present owner, who has a very aloof attitude toward the spirit world.

They

are later joined by comic relief in the form of Dr. Montague’s zany wife (Mary Case), whose approach to the spirit world is more mystic than her husband’s scientific methods. She is accompanied by her paramour, Arthur Parker (Tom Rimer), a gun-toting school headmaster, ever at her beck and call.

The

play gets off to a slow start as the characters are introduced and Dr. Montague reluctantly relays the dark history of Hill House. The first taste of spookiness only comes at the tail end of the first act. Things don’t get really creepy until the second act, as it becomes clear the house is targeting Eleanor’s psyche and she slowly begins to become unhinged. Her transformation is the backbone of the story, and Strickland portrays this strikingly well.

There are two brief intermissions, but lest you think these are respites for you to enjoy your ghost cookies in peace, rest assured, this is not the case. When the house lights come up, grim grinning ghosts come out to socialize. While this does somewhat take away from what makes this story so unique in the horror genre by shoving ghosts in your face rather than leaving the source of the haunting ambiguous, if you’re looking for a haunted house experience, this is where you’ll get that. The character work here is pretty good (despite not having a lot to go on given that they are not fleshed out in the script), from the little girl trying to play peek-a-boo and duck-duck-goose with the audience to a handyman carrying around some sort of tool. The ghostly ensemble consists of Steven Ferron, Brittney Simard, Bethany Whitehead, Michelle Savoie and Lauren Ferreira. During the show itself, for the most part, they stay behind their doors, creating the haunting sound effects.

If

you’re looking for a scare this spooky season, *The Haunting of Hill House* may scratch that itch. Just watch out for those pesky ghosts!

The Haunting of Hill House runs through Oct 20 at The RISE Playhouse, 142 Clinton St, Woonsocket. For tickets, visit ristage.org.