Review: ‘Mourning Becomes Electra,’ Up Close and PowerfulZačátek formuláře

Konec formuláře

**By Laura Collins-Hughes,** May 3, 2017

Even with the stamp of genius on it, age has made Eugene O’Neill’s “Mourning Becomes Electra” one of those classics that people avoid — a marathon-length trilogy stuffed with florid melodrama and Freudian psychology, and seasoned with sea chanteys. So much of it tends to cloy.

But I didn’t check my watch once in the five hours of David Herskovits’s bold, astringent revival for Target Margin Theater, which (full disclosure) does keep the chanteys, sorry to say. They’re only minimally painful, though, in this lucid and astonishingly intimate production, which makes a strong case for the enduring fascination of the Mannons of New England and their various alarming urges: a dollop of incest here, a spot of homicide there.

Using Aeschylus’ “Oresteia” as a template, O’Neill begins “Mourning” just as the Civil War ends. The Mannon women — the adulterous Christine (Stephanie Weeks) and her daughter, Lavinia (Eunice Wong), who is unhealthily close to her father — await the return of their men from battle: the patriarch, Ezra (Satya Bhabha), and the wounded son, Orin (also Mr. Bhabha), who is as creepily drawn to his mother as his sister is to their father. (All three were in “Drunken With What,” a 100-minute telling of the tale Mr. Herskovits staged last year.)

This being Greek tragedy, blood will flow, starting when the glamorous Christine (outfitted by Kaye Voyce in a body-hugging emerald evening gown) murders Ezra so that she can be with her lover (again Mr. Bhabha, the cast standout). This being O’Neill, emotions will get overwrought, and family history will be twisted into doom.

This deftly streamlined production ushers the audience from space to space in Abrons Arts Center’s Playhouse Theater — the lobby, the balcony, the orchestra, the stage — in a fascinating experiment in proximity: How close is too close to this play, and how far away is just far enough?

The inquiry pervades the show, and it’s about more than physical remove. What happens when the actors distance themselves from their own roles, performing with flat voices and stylized gestures, and how does it change when they slip into their characters’ skin? When words are spoken at a whisper but the sound (designed by Mr. Herskovits with intricate precision) is as hushed and resonant as a voice in your ear, will it bring you closer to the drama? Nearer to O’Neill?

This remarkably fluid production, which turns out to be fully capable of encompassing those many variations, is faithful to O’Neill’s text while relentlessly questioning it — perfectly comfortable, for instance, with eliciting laughs where the playwright wouldn’t have wanted them. The surprising result is both Kabuki soap opera and vivid clarity: an interpretation of this play that feels alive right now.

The Mannons are forever hiding behind their public masks, even in private, so it is ingenious that the masks are signified here by thin black microphone cords, one bisecting the forehead of each family member. The microphones are essential to our eavesdropping on the production’s one scene of ambushing vulnerability: the predawn talk between Ezra and Christine, right before she kills him. We are in the balcony, but we might as well be in the bedroom with them.

Or so it would seem. When, for the last grim stretch of “Mourning,” we take our seats onstage at the edge of Lenore Doxsee’s set, the oscillation of distance largely stops. In the room with Lavinia and Orin, we experience at close range an oppressive onslaught of sordid secrets, and the fusty heaviness of the play takes over.

Yet there is something illuminating even in this — because when the curtain falls and we are trapped inside that house, the ghosts that we are left with don’t belong to the Mannons. O’Neill was haunted by his family all his life. These ghosts are his.