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Real Live Sex on Stage

nytheatre.com review

by Martin Denton · December 1, 2001



Real Live Sex on Stage is a lot better than you'd expect a play called *Real Live Sex on Stage* to be. Paul Wells' new serious comic drama is about a group of six young adults who are haunted by a devastating shared memory—a memory that has contributed, surely, to some of the dysfunction, sexual and otherwise, that they are

experiencing in their lives. As advertised, there's a lot of sexual activity depicted in this play; know that Wells is uncompromising in showing his audience, in more detail than they're used to or than may be absolutely necessary, his characters' damaged sexualities. Know, further, that *Real Live Sex on Stage* includes a long sequence of male nudity and (obviously simulated) sex that, though integral to the story, may be more—what's the word?—frank than some people may be comfortable with. And know, finally, that there's actually not a single gratuitous moment in this play, which, though imperfect, is a compelling, rewarding, well-crafted exploration of childhood, fear, and memory.

Okay, now that all the summarizing and caveat-making is out of the way, let me tell you something of the story. Mike, Mark, Shelley, Maggie, Jennifer, and Lisa were friends twenty years ago in Rockford, Illinois. Now adults, they've spread out and lost touch with one another: Mike is a gay avant-garde performance artist in New York, Mark is a barker for a Times Square strip club, Shelley is the star of a popular sitcom, Maggie is a porn film star, and Jennifer is a high-powered real estate executive; only Lisa remains in Rockford, still living in her childhood home. We meet these six—as kids and as grown-ups—in a series of short interlocking scenes that serve to introduce us to the characters and to demonstrate, quite palpably, that something is troubling each of them.

All six are screwed-up, sexually and otherwise, though in different ways. Jennifer is a control freak with blatant intimacy issues. Mark is alcoholic and sometimes hits his girlfriends. Shelley struggles with loneliness and eating disorders. Maggie, a lesbian, makes straight porn films for pay. Mike channels his feelings of shame and inferiority in exhibitionism. And they're all having nightmares, recurring dreams of a barely-remembered event from twenty years ago that are tearing their lives apart.

Finally Lisa decides it's time to reconnect. Gradually, she makes contact with each of the other five, and they discover forgotten bonds that bring them together. You'll have to see the play to learn exactly what happened to these damaged souls on an afternoon twenty years ago, but I will tell you that when you do see it you'll sit riveted in your seat waiting to find out. And after you do, you won't be at all disappointed; Wells has crafted a fine, suspenseful drama.

He's also created a host of interesting and sympathetic characters for us to meet and care about, providing strong opportunities for his excellent cast. Michael Earle (Mark), Renee Erickson-Farr (Lisa), Laura Lanman (Jennifer), and Amy Overman (Maggie) do fine work here, as do Kevin T. Collins, Stephen Halliday, and Jessica Laulhere in a variety of supporting roles (Collins is a hoot as talk show host Larry King). Sebastian Sosnowski is even more impressive as Mike, showing us the little boy and the insecure man with great specificity; he also has that long nude sequence I mentioned earlier, a performance art parody that's at once alarming and funny and which he handles with grace and humor. And Amy Rush is terrific as Shelley; she has a scene where she suffers, more or less, a nervous breakdown on live TV that's quite remarkable.

Without losing sight of his play's genuinely serious theme, Wells also manages to insert lots of wonderful comic set pieces—most memorably Mike's crazy performance art exhibition, but also a porn film shoot, a phone-in TV talk show sequence, and an evening at a cruisy gay bar—all of which are witty and on-the-money.

Wells' script could probably do with some cutting. And his focus here on sex work—three of the play's six main characters are involved in it—may prove to be a limiting choice in terms of finding a broad audience for this play. But *Real Live Sex on Stage* is finally a gripping and well-made drama, staged with economy and sensitivity and intelligence.

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Design