

The Black Box

Theater Night, Chicago Literary Club, April 19, 2020 and 2021

Written by Elaine Loeser

Alabaster is a place in rural Alabama. It is also the name of a new play that received the National New Play Network award for playwriting. The NNPN new play award allows theater companies all over America to be a part of the rolling world premier of the winning play. This year, Alabaster is, or will be, produced in eleven theaters across the country, including here in Chicago at the 16th Street Theater in Berwyn, just over the western city limit. (The final performance was March 1, 2020).

Eleven cities is a big number for this rolling premier. It is usually three or four theaters that offer productions, but this play met with great enthusiasm. The possibilities for its staging and interpretation seem to have inspired creative producers and their directors and companies to step up and give life to this author and her voice and vision. It had never been on its feet, so it must have been the writing that inspired the rush to produce.

Alabaster is a women's play. Its female characters are two disparate women coming to grips with terrible personal pain, and two goats, a mother and daughter, one of whom can talk, and even sometimes be heard. Both women are artists in their way: Alice is a sophisticated celebrity photographer from Los Angeles who has somehow made a number of very rich and successful actresses look sad in her photo spreads. Her new project, which has brought her to Alabaster Alabama, is a book about damaged women -- women who have been physically injured by life, by men, by nature. June, the sole resident of a failing farm on the outskirts of low-brow Alabaster, is a survivor of a massive tornado that killed her entire family and decimated her home. Only her goat survived, and lived to tell the tale, which she does with gusto. Weezy is a hostile and unforgiving goat. Just what June needs. Who wouldn't.

The story is never in doubt. Both women reveal themselves and their losses as Alice's camera lens clicks and captures the moments. The stage at 16th Street is simple -- a bedroom with a bed for eventual seduction, a window for feeding goats, a pasture with two folding lawn chairs suitable for goats to lounge in and observe the humans, a video camera, and some random paintings made on planks of wood that remain from the ruined barn that took flight with June's father on board. The paintings, we are told, are virtuoso, but that is something we take on faith. Alice thinks they are museum quality, so we believe her. Sort of. June is in the process of painting them as we watch. Alice is in the process of revealing in photographs that June is beautiful despite her scars, both inside and out. And for a moment, maybe more, June sees that.

This is a 70 minute play rattling around in a two hour running time. When the story is never in doubt, as here, there is always the danger in a too-long play of repetition in the dialogue and storytelling, and that is in evidence here. There is also a tendency, when a play is too long, to put the issues on the nose, and

that happens here as well. None of that is necessary to capture the audience with the sadness of these women's stories or the healing nature of art and love. We audiences are smart and we have seen it all before. We know how all that works. What we really need is to see it work here, to feel it in the silences and in the subtext. We don't need excessive telling or the characters' repeated resistance to the story revelations delivered with too much noise and some very bad language. Even the goat swears a blue streak. And in front of her elderly mother, no less. It is hardly necessary for a goat to swear, even if her owner sets a bad example. Even if it gets easy laughs.

The play is not successful despite the seemingly fresh elements of a talking goat sitting in a folding chair, and a successful celebrity photog, condescending to slum in rural Alabama. The revelation of life's hurts and scars is not fresh as a theatrical subject, especially when they are the very subject of the play from the start. They are not revealed as a consequence of other life taking place in front of us, but because exploring past damage is the whole point of the meeting of the two human characters on the stage. From the start, the audience is thinking: Okay, we get it, let's get on with it. But it takes a while. There is foreplay, then reluctance, then rejection of the revelations, then a grudging acceptance of the revelations, but rejection of the cure. Then (maybe) acceptance of the cure -- real human contact, followed by leaving Alabaster at last. It takes way too long to get there from here. And there are no surprises along the way.

But the play is not the only thing to see. There are all the other elements that are on display in the small black box of this theater. The house was full for Alabaster. That is a very good thing, and unusual in the world of Chicago's brand of Off-Broadway theater. The audience was older. Almost entirely so. That is not such a good thing. The future of theater depends on younger people filling the seats that will eventually be deserted (permanently) by the current occupants. Surely the themes of modern new plays, many of which are about the struggles of young people, people of color, gender politics, climate concerns, are of utmost interest to the x,y and z generations, the Millennials, and whatever iteration comes next. These are their lifeblood as themes go. Theater is leaving the older generations behind, as themes go. But the transition is not in evidence in the black box. On Broadway, maybe, where star status brings in young audiences who could as easily be at a rock concert as a play. The youthful screaming at Hamilton and Six (both rock-rap operas) starts even before the curtain goes up. But in the legit theater, the world of the spoken word, the small space, the language of life, youth is MIA.

Theatrical subtlety is quiet and slow to develop. It doesn't proceed in short scenes, quick cuts and objectified characters. It doesn't belt out songs or strident truths. Theater on the small stage, even when the small stage is on Broadway, is subtle, dependent on small, personal, poetic, original language, subtext and the revelation of personal and universal truths. It requires choices to be made. It takes time, is generally small in space and time, is quiet or inventive, and moves small distances that can nonetheless change lives forever. It's not easy to achieve, and takes concentration to appreciate.

The best plays leave audiences thinking into the lobby, to the evening's dinner table, to the dream world and onto the morning train. The best plays pose dilemmas that are not resolved, or are hard to resolve, or are, perhaps, irresolvable. They cause tensions among real-life friends and lovers and

arguments about what was seen, what it meant and how it translates into real life. It's more than a good story, though it should be that, but is about the human condition, then, now and forevermore.

New plays, like the classics, still require all these elements. Modern themes still require these classic elements. The question may be whether in the world of the text and tweet, these subtleties can be sustained. Whether the well-made play is still relevant in a world that provides so many certain and easy answers to very complicated questions. Ambiguity and ambivalence are the essence of good theater, not certainly. No easy answers. Nothing predictable. Appreciating life's complications, not eliminating them. Not tweetable. Not reducible to a log line. Something wonderful in the dark and dank of a black box. Something to think about. Something fresh and original. Something with a voice all its own. That is the world of the theater.

Casting too is a living membrane in the black box theater. The typical off-Broadway theater in Chicago is made up of a regular seasoned company of actors who form the core of each producing organization. It is an ensemble of actors, directors, producers and creative artists who make the choices about which plays to produce, the actors to bring the plays to life, the look, the sound and feel of the play. Each theater company tries to serve its core ensemble, as well as its subscription audience. That imposes limitations as well as value. The actors are vetted, dependable, committed to the theater and its artistic vision, but they may not necessarily serve every play. Casting is crucial to bringing the play to life, and the age, sex, color and look of an actor is important. The very meaning of the play may depend on these personal qualities.

Over time, because actors come in every size, color, age and gender, casting has become creative. Just because Shakespeare or Inge or Ibsen wrote plays that involved largely Caucasian characters, modern theater and modern audiences are able to accept actors who are different in race and even gender in classic roles. Creative casting is standard practice in modern theater, and so can serve the make-up of a theater company's acting corp. That has been a gift to the talented actors in Chicago and everywhere, and sometimes brings a context to the role that would not have been possible otherwise.

But the make-up of modern plays can be very specific about the race, gender and age of characters. The entire point of the play often is tied directly to these characteristics. And that specificity is honored in productions of these new plays more than it is in classical plays. So if a new play calls for a number of Latino characters, or African American characters, or female characters (as Alabaster does) then those roles must be played by actors of similar color, ethnicity or gender. It is not acceptable to do creative casting. That can often create a dilemma for the theater company: pass on great, new creative plays that don't suit the demographics of your acting core, or leave your own acting ensemble off the stage and cast actors from outside the company. That hurts morale and denies loyal actors who have supported the theater company, a job, a chance to help bring a new character to life, another highlight on the acting resume, a pay check and the creative challenge of brave new work. It's a big loss. Often those jobs go to better-known actors, equity actors, competitors in the market for the limited number of good roles available each year.

Life in the theater has always been hard. There is very little glamour in the black box. Turn the lights up and see. There are long hours, low pay, late nights, uncertain neighborhoods, no parking, endless rejection, empty houses, heartless reviewers or worse, no reviewers, off nights, blown lines, all the variables of the brave new world of the modern play and the small theater company. But theater is in our blood. It is the theater, after all. The boards under actors' feet are the same ones trod by the greatest actors in history. Three walls protect them, and the fourth one reveals their heart, their talent, everything they are. Everything we are. The size of the stage doesn't matter, only the fact of it. So it must go on. The theater is in our blood too -- the audience, the faces dimly seen in the dark, upturned, waiting for magic to happen. Young faces look particularly lovely in that light.