

'Desire Under the Elms' an emotional, visceral ride From the dialect of its script to its intense triangular relationship, the play presents challenges.

December 09, 2011 | By Lynne Heffley



Monette Magrath (Abbie) and Jason Dechert (Eben) in A Noise Within's production of "Desire Under the Elms" by Eugene O'Neill, directed by Damaso Rodriguez. (Photo by Craig Schwartz)

Adultery, infanticide, overtones of incest and patricidal urges: Eugene O'Neill's 1924 American classic, "Desire Under the Elms," with its deliberate evocation of mythic Greek tragedy, caused an uproar when it was first produced. Indeed, a 1926 production in Los Angeles was deemed so obscene that its actors were arrested.

In reality, of course, the stage has never been a stranger to all manner of sexual dysfunction and brutality. And the shock value of O'Neill's play about the converging fates of a rigid tyrant obsessed with the farm he has scratched from stony ground, the sons who covet it and a seductive new stepmother with a predatory eye — may seem somewhat blunted by today's measure.

Still, "Desire" remains one of the playwright's less produced plays. "It is very compelling, but extremely intimidating," said Dámaso Rodriguez, who is directing the drama as part of A Noise Within's inaugural season in Pasadena, where it runs in repertory through Dec. 18. "And in large part, that's because when you look at the text, it's almost as if it's written in another language."

While "Desire" is set in mid-19th century rural New England, the dialect that O'Neill created for his tormented, archetypal characters — "hum" for "home," "wuked" for "worked," "yewr'n" for "yours" — is something of a lingual leap into the unknown, Rodriguez said. "We don't know what it sounded like in his

head, but for me, I think it helps connect the play to its Greek origins, giving an otherworldly, distant quality to these people.”

To approximate O’Neill’s language on the page and allow for clarity and accessibility on A Noise Within’s new thrust stage, Rodriguez and the cast worked with a dialect coach. “Once we got over that barrier, we found the play extremely easy to connect with. I feel on the whole, the play takes care of you. The way it is structured, the way O’Neill uses repetition, the way you experience the play, suddenly you realize that you are cued into it somehow: That’s O’Neill, that’s the play.”

Heading the cast are A Noise Within veteran William Dennis Hunt as 76-year-old patriarch Ephraim Cabot, Jason Dechert as Eben, the son haunted by his dead mother’s ghost; and Monette Magrath as Abbie, Ephraim’s calculating new young wife.

“It’s kind of dangerous to even do this play without knowing who will be able to step into the role of Cabot and Eben and Abbie,” Rodriguez said. With the early casting of Hunt and Dechert, “we knew going in that we had two of the triangle. We had to go out and find Abbie. Luckily, Monette came in to audition.”

With an extensive background in professional regional theater, Magrath had the experience and classical training needed, Rodriguez said. “She also has what I call a ‘truth meter.’ She is able to play the sort of grand emotional experiences that this character goes through moment to moment in a very grounded way.” The role of Abbie “is extremely demanding, emotionally and technically,” he added. “There’s the sexuality that’s shocking and surprising for this play from 1924, and in our production it’s very physical. There’s a lot of violence and intensity in the triangle, so it’s a grueling part.”

Indeed, Magrath, making her A Noise Within debut with “Desire,” was ambivalent about auditioning for the role, primarily, she said, because Abbie’s journey “from seductive manipulator to desperate lover” wasn’t completely understandable in the initial reading.

“When I approached this play, my first thought was that it’s about power. But in the end, for me, profoundly, it is about love. Abbie has never felt love for or from another person. When she does, it’s so overwhelming that she’ll do anything to keep it. That’s the great tragedy.”

Rodriguez, the former associate artistic director of the Pasadena Playhouse (which was forced to cut staff after going into bankruptcy in early 2010), is co-founder of the edgy, highly respected Furious Theatre Company, based for six years at the Playhouse’s upstairs Carrie Hamilton Theatre and now “purposely itinerant.” (Rodriguez will helm the company’s next production, “NOgoodDEED,” a new play by Matt Pelfrey at [Inside] the Ford in Los Angeles in January.)

Many of the classics that he has directed independent of Furious over the last few years — by O’Neill, Tennessee Williams, Clifford Odets — have “something raw and emotional for the actors in each of them,” Rodriguez has found, a quality that is at the core of the Furious vision, he said.

“For me ‘Desire’ is a Furious play in that it’s an emotional, visceral ride.”

DETAILS

What: “Desire Under the Elms”

Where: A Noise Within, 3352 East Foothill Blvd., Pasadena.

Showtimes and tickets: 2 and 7 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 11, 2 and 8 p.m. Sat, Dec. 17, 2 p.m. Sun., Dec. 18.

(Ends next Sun.) \$42-\$46.

Contact: (626) 356-3100 Ext. 1 and ANoiseWithin.org.