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A Murder of Crows

By: *Jack Quinn*



Suzannah (Leah Smith) and Andy (Greg Mozgala)

Nicu's Spoon, a theater company, in its third remarkable year, is dedicated to producing socially relevant theatrical works that present new ideas, challenge definitions, and touch the heart in an unexpected ways. They have staged a morbidly disturbing production of Mac Wellman's "A Murder of Crows". No one is writing plays these days anything quite like Mac Wellman who insists on saturating the mind with blistering satire, densely verbose, betraying strong emotions. Wellman has been quoted as saying that theater that is absolutely transparent and immediately consumable has driven the intelligent audience away. Most of Wellman's plays are set in America's heartland, a milieu of broken dreams, diminished expectations, and cultural decay. Fans of his work describe the location as "Macland", a Midwest of the mind where even the whitest of pickets fences can't conceal the blackest of hearts.

Wellman is definitely an acquired taste that can stymie even experienced theatergoers. But "A Murder of Crows" is a great introduction to his work, a rich, stimulating poem that locates the destructive spirit lurking amid amber waves of grain and purple mountains of majesty. "Murder of Crows" introduces a recurring main character in several Wellman plays, Susannah (Leah Smith), a young girl, humiliated by her family's dependence on her relatives after her father, Raymond's (Bart Mallard) untimely death smothered by a pile of chicken shit. Susannah, her mother, Nella (Barbara Kidd Calvano), and her brother, Andy (Gregg Mozgala), are forced to live in a converted chicken coop on the property of her uncle Howard, smarmingly played by (Reggie Barton) and his mean spirited wife Georgia (Elizabeth Bell). Andy, a Gulf War veteran, spends most of his time standing frozen as a human sundial in the garden, taking in the scenery and mood changes of the rest of the cast. Susannah has become something like a human barometer, constantly harping about the weather about to change, which is a metaphor for her yearning for some deeper meaning about her own pathetic existence.

The actions are consistently surprising as Wellman navigates a course of topics equally absurd and dramatic. The family seeks to bury the father in a glass coffin, and Howard can't resist complaining to his brother about what a bad life he's lived. Georgia won't rest until, in her eyes, the freeloading relatives of Howard vacate the property. It is never quite clear how Howard has come to be more of a success than Raymond, but it is alluded to that he graduated from Yale. Whatever success he may have achieved is certainly not reflected in the act of converting chicken coop to house poor relatives.

What makes Nicu's Spoon's production work so well is Pamela Butler's snappy direction, which perfectly balances the tone from bleakness to hopeful social commentary. The audience sits in a half moon suspended seating area about ten feet off the stage looking down on the characters perhaps reflecting Wellman's moral superiority to the "poor folk" of his plays. Pamela Butler also deserves kudos for an extremely inventive set design within the confinements of a blackbox. Of particular note are the performances of the three crows, Rainbow Geffner, Christopher Conant, and Brian Lee, with perfect masks made by Joshua Carlebach.

"A Murder of Crows"

Belt Theater, 336 West 37th Street

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\$15

Reviewer's bio

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