

## Love Taking Wing

by Daniel Burson

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Love, commitment, marriage—the troika of conventional steps to romance. You find someone, it takes a while, but eventually you settle down, end of story. But when it's not that simple, when the "conventions" of romance break down, what other formulas can we find inside ourselves? What kinds of feelings defy categorization, resist commitment, and tap into a darkness that is anything but conventional? Elizabeth Egloff's play *The Swan*, now being performed by Nicu's Spoon Theater, takes a stab at those and a few more questions, and then throws another monkey wrench into the works—one of the lovers is a bird.

Or he's a man. Or both. Or neither. The woman whose life he enters, Dora (Stephanie Barton-Farcas), says, "He's that too..." without much certainty. In fact, about the only certain thing in this drama is that Dora's life is being ferociously turned on its head ever since the swan (Karam K. Puri) crashes into her plate-glass window one night.

Besides cracking the glass and bringing dead rodents into the living room, the swan seriously shakes up Dora's relationship with her boyfriend Kevin (T.J. Mannix), a married milkman who gets her up at the crack of dawn to see him. As the swan grows into their world, Dora's and Kevin's lives crumble around them, and their most basic fears and impulses are exposed. Pushed to the brink, Dora is brought in touch with the elemental nature of her love: for Kevin, for her ex-husbands, and for the swan, whom she names Bill.

*The Swan* is a gritty, poetic exploration of love that strips away "convention" and goes after the animal instincts that lurk in the shadows of romance. No, not lust (though there are some moments of intense sexual tension in the play) but the unflinching connection between two individuals, and the uncomfortable question of where that connection stems from. These are some big questions, and the play gets a little heady at times, as the characters wrestle with their emotions through Egloff's sparse, stylized dialogue.

The Nicu's Spoon production takes a direct run at those complex questions and flings itself stubbornly on them with few frills and no standing around. Everything is stripped down to expose the characters and their hearts like naked beasts, struggling in the wilderness. On an almost uncomfortably barren set, under unwavering light, the characters stand out either in bright white (there are many eerie recurrences of the color white throughout the piece) or in silhouette when seen through the massive plate-glass window that dominates the stage. Dora and Kevin are trapped, and find themselves simply and starkly exposed before us.

Which is as it should be, since *The Swan* is a character-driven play that finds its most satisfying moments in the poetic unfurling of people's hidden feelings. As Dora, Stephanie Barton-Farcas gives a yearning, honest performance that holds together wonderfully while her character's life is falling apart. There is truthfulness in her that makes her believable as a lonely, confused Midwestern woman even in the play's most lyrical passages. Barton-Farcas finds a way to stay with Dora through her tumultuous psychological struggle, and takes every moment—from brandishing a rifle to changing from one identical white dress into another—with equal emotional commitment.

Opposite her, T.J. Mannix gives a more uneven performance as the well-meaning but unstable Kevin. While there are times when everything clicks into place and he carries a scene, Kevin never quite takes shape as a real person, which makes it difficult to connect with the changes he goes through in the second act. As the swan, Karam K. Puri is appropriately mysterious and birdlike, and walks a fine line between childishness and dark-hearted menace with few missteps.

With the strong acting exposed for all to see, though, the play suffers a little from slow pacing. The first act especially drags its heels all too frequently, which diffuses the tensions between the characters that have started a slow build from the play's opening moments. Director Eva Burgess makes good use of the quirky, barren space, and along with Puri has given the swan itself a tremendous animalistic presence. But she doesn't really find the physical life of the play until later in the second act. The simple, haunting moments created in the climax stand out in contrast to the flatter stagings that came before them.

*The Swan*, like the questions of romance it explores, is a tough show to come to grips with. At some times there's almost too much to process, while at others, it stumbles to a crawl before the tension mounts again. If you're ready to sort through the depths of your emotions, though, this won't disappoint. *The Swan* may be an unconventional lover, but it's a revealing exploration from a company that's clearly not afraid to ride out some rough spots in the pursuit of awkward and beautiful truths.