

Anna Lucasta by Philip Yordan



L - R Ashlee Olivia, Carl Crudup, Kaylon Hunt, Nick Gillie

by Joe Straw

Love moves fast. Sometimes too fast. And sometimes goose bumps have got nothing to do with love; it's just a little cold, that's all. - Narrator

The Robey Theatre Company in association with The Latino Theater Company presents Anna Lucasta by Philip Yordan and magnificently directed by Ben Guillory.

The first thing I noticed when entering the theatre is the resplendent multi-level Set & Lighting Design by Tom Meleck. Forget subtle symbolism, the sets are real, stunning, and places where actors love to perform their magic, all in an intimate setting.

The play begins in the living room of the Lucasta family in 1941 Pennsylvania. (Oddly enough, I thought it was late 1940's and after the war.) The Lucasta family is African American, and working class, struggling through the issues of day-to-day living.

Stella Lucasta (Alvina Carroll Saunders), with child, is silently reading a book when her brother, Stanley Lucasta (Kem Saunders), brings in letter with a southern return address. Her husband Frank (Sammie Wayne IV), a postal employee, suddenly takes interest in the letter.

As does Theresa Lucasta (Cydney Wayne Davis) who clutches the letter when she learns it's from an old friend, someone who, in her younger years, she found very handsome, Otis Slocum (not seen). Her face is flushed, and her feet move rapidly only for a moment. Then she is brought back down with the harsh realities of her married life. She is stuck with her husband, Joe Lucasta (Robert Clements), who has become an alcoholic in his later years and also has mental problems.

Joe takes possession of the letter, opens it, and either he can't read because of his eyes, or he just can't read. His daughter-in-law, Katie Lucasta (Tanya Lane), reads the letter.

Otis, Joe's best friend, writes that he is sending his son, Rudolf Slocum (Dwain A. Perry), a southern farmer and recent college graduate, up to Pennsylvania to find a wife. And he brings \$800.00 in his pockets to boot.

Everyone in the household is matrimonially taken, but their eyes light up when they think about the enormous sum coming their way. They have some thinking to do, what with baby on the way, unemployment, and liquor habits.

A plan is devised to get Rudolf's money. Frank, the politician of the family, comes up with a proposal to have Rudolph marry someone in the family. The only one available is Anna Lucasta (Ashlee Olivia) but they have to get her "off the streets" and back home again for any chance at the money.

"She don't come back to this house!" – Joe

Joe wants no part of this plan and he is adamant that Anna will not be allowed back into his house. This is not sitting too well with his son Stanley, and son-in-law, Frank. Frank hustles Stanley out of the room saying that he wants a word with Joe, man-to-man, and emphasizes that his expertise in political persuasion will do the trick. But his verbal persuasion doesn't work and Frank punches Joe in the stomach. (Frank, in fact, is going postal.) Joe, doubling over, is now breathlessly convinced to go along with the plan.

Frank, bringing Stanley back into the room, says that Joe has had a change of heart and asks Stanley for his last \$25.00 for bus fair. Katie (Tanya Lane), Stanley's wife, has trepidations but hands the money over.

Frank throws on Joe's coat, hat and umbrella and informs everyone that Joe is off to Brooklyn to find Anna.

Meanwhile, at Noah's bar in Brooklyn, Blanche (Jennifer Sammons) is taking a break from hustling out on the street. She is cold and would like a nice drink to warm her on this cold night. She begs Noah (Carl Crudup), owner of this nice establishment on the wharf, for a little credit.

But Noah is not a banker, and he is in a hurry to close up and get home when a young sumptuous, Anna Lucasta (Ashlee Olivia), walks in and pretties herself up for a night of fun. And boy, is Anna Lucasta saucy in every way imaginable!



L - R Ashlee Olivia, Talmadge Talib

There to exploit the young Anna is Eddie (Talmadge Talib), a local hustler, who says he can do a lot for Anna. Anna wants nothing to do with him and when things get a little out of hand Anna takes a cigarette to Eddie's neck.

Eddie is hustled out of the door followed by Blanche and Noah locks the door.

Anna, alone in thought, comes to the conclusion that she has nowhere to go, and no place to spend the night. And all Noah can do is offer her two sandwiches and the best in her nightly endeavors.

Suddenly, two sailors, Danny (Nick Gillie) and his friend Lester (Kaylon Hunt), enter the bar. Danny is very acquainted with Anna and is immediately all over her. Danny presents her with presents only a sailor can appreciate, a cheap necklace, bracelet and a silly little sculpture steeped in a little Caribbean mysticism.

After laying out all this cash for trinkets, Danny is broke. So Danny brings along his friend, Lester to pay the tab.

It doesn't take long for Anna to realize her paycheck is with Lester who she suddenly takes a liking too. This flirtatious behavior doesn't sit too well with Danny. And as Lester is enjoying the badinage, Danny tries to pull Anna away.

Danny tells Anna that he wants her to come to live with him.

Danny, are you asking me to marry you? – Anna

No, he doesn't, really. Danny wants Anna, to come home to, to cook his meals, etc., but he doesn't want to marry her, and his feelings are obvious.

Deeply hurt Anna saunters over to Lester to dance. Lester can't dance and Danny takes over.

That's when Joe shows up and asks Anna to come back home with him. At first, Anna resists but, knowing she has no place to go, she leaves with Joe.

Now back at home, Anna has put herself together and looks like a decent young lady. The outward appearance has changed but she is still the person she was four days earlier, wild and cagey.

Everyone is happy that Anna is back home, Mom, Stanley, and newly employed Katie who blurts out that they only want Rudolph's money. Nevertheless, Anna is up for this little game.

Moments later, Joe comes through the door without Rudolph and you just know that something is up. Naturally, everyone else is up in arms because the guy with the money is not there.

Joe takes to his hymnal and starts singing.

Rudolph arrives later and is fondled by Theresa Lucasta who says that he looks just like his father, Otis.

Once introductions are made and the couple is left alone, Rudolph asks Anna to be his wife. And as they kiss, Theresa walks in on them, and Rudolph asks Anna to be his wife.

The family's happiness is suddenly interrupted when Joe comes in drunk. He mistakes Rudolph for Otis and paws him like an old friend.

The acting of the concatenated lives of the dysfunctional Lucasta family was superb in this production.

Robert Clements had an interesting characterization of Joe Lucasta. He didn't appear to be overly religious. He sang from a hymnal at one point but did not sing with a religious and overly zealous

conviction. They said he had some kind of emotional problem, but whether it was caused from alcohol or drugs or an emotional attachment to Anna was left ambiguous. I think the stronger choice would have been for Joe to show a deeper emotional (and even physical) attachment to Anna and this would have strengthened his objective. Still, Clements gave Joe a character with many levels and it was a magnificent job.

Cydney Wayne Davis as Theresa Lucasta gave it her all in this performance that was filled with humor and lots of love. She was at one time madly in love with another man, and that same man (in another form) is coming back to bring joy into her life all over again. And when she sees the young man she must have had second thoughts about her marriage of many years. Theresa lets the other members of the family handle the important matters while she takes care of the day-to-day stuff. Davis has a fine voice, and when she sings it's like getting two shows in one. Davis also has a commanding presence and it is just wonderful to watch her in action.

Ashlee Olivia as Anna Lucasta was absolutely fantastic. Her moments are captivating, her expression superb. As the character, she has to manipulate the men in her life to get what she wants. Her character is catlike, head cocked to the side, and sizing her prey before she verbally strikes. She is caught in a whirlwind of sexual play unable to see the end results of her follies. But she lives for the moment and makes the best of her life altering decisions. She is willing to help out the family once she finds out the reasons for her coming home is not altogether altruistic. But she has a history that she can never let go and that history weighs on her heavily. As much as she wants to please everyone, she wants to please her father most of all. For some reason, her life didn't turn out the way she wanted it to.

Alvina Carroll Saunders plays Stella Lucasta Lynch, the pregnant wife. There is a reason the character is pregnant. And this means there are endless possibilities for the actor to go as far as she wants. The character is eating for two, is very hormonal, and they need that money desperately. With this in mind this particular character can go in many directions, with a variety of choices, sympathy, pains, eating choices, demanding husband choices, the list goes on. What I did see was good but could have gone a lot farther in bringing more life to a character that maybe hid behind her condition rather than accentuating her condition.

Sammie Wayne IV plays Frank Lynch. Frank is an interesting character in this play. He is the spokesman for the entire family. He is the mover and shaker and resorts to violence when all else fails. Wayne has interesting faltering voice where one is not sure if he is improvising the lines, remembering the lines, or giving an added dimension to the character. Still, I enjoyed the performance but wished there was a sense of urgency with the money.

Carl Crudup played Noah the bartender. One need only look at the character to see a magnificent life lived. His choices were specific and his characterization unique to his own special being. He is a master actor, outstanding on his stage. As the character, he has a fondness for Anna but it never goes beyond the barrier that is his bar. Whether he sees her as daughter is unclear and he leaves that to our imagination.

Nick Gillie played the Danny, the sailor. Gillie sulked around the bar without going for what he was after. All the physical elements were there but the emotional commitment was lacking. And what makes this man what he is? There seems to be something inherently wrong with his character that was not evident on stage. He must know she wants the money so why does he buy all of these trinkets and leave himself without any money? Why is he leaving the service considering it is 1941? Why would he be allowed to leave the military as he nears the end of his military service? Why is there no talk of Europe on the verge of collapse and looming threat of war? There was also a slow gate to his walk in his characterization that is something one would see in today and not particular to the 1940's. Still there was a lot of fine work here.

Kem Saunders plays Stanley Lucasta, the only son of the family. Stanley is pampered, unemployed, and doesn't want to do much around the house except sleep and eat. He is happy to let his brother-in-law take over and well as anyone else who comes along. Stanley is like an old cat, sitting on his favorite

chair in the sun only looking up when it suits his fancy. He doesn't have kids. But he must want something, possibly to take control of the house once his parents die off.

Tanya Lane as Katie Lucasta plays an endearing character. As the character, she is smart, resourceful, and loving and will not tolerate anyone taking advantage of anyone else. Her conscience will not allow it. She is stoic and wants to treat all with the special kind of dignity she believes they deserve. Lane gives an incredible performance and it is always wonderful to see her in a Robey production.

Jennifer Sammons plays Blanche a woman looking for love in all the wrong places. She is beyond her prime (for this kind of trade) but holds on because that is the only thing she knows. And also appears to be moving into a life of crime by stealing the binoculars. She wears a blonde wig, because men prefer blondes? Her speech is slow drawl with a slight southern accent. Her objective was not clear. Never really got the idea of what she wanted from her counterpart in Noah's bar. She needs Anna and she needs to feed that need. Nevertheless, Sammons was fascinating to watch and did some very nice work.



L - R Dwain A. Perry, Ashlee Olivia

Dwain A. Perry did a very nice job as Rudolf Slocum. His character is a little more on the up and up. He cares little for the money and he doesn't mind having a woman with a little more experience, in fact Rudolf craves the witty repartee, the sarcastic remarks, and sees a woman with a lot of spunk. He madly falls in love with a misdirected woman and it pains him that he cannot have her. Still that doesn't stop him from trying with each breath he takes. Perry was excellent but I didn't hear much of a deep southern accent.

Talmage Talib plays Eddie. Eddie is a pimp, pure and simple. He is his own recruiting tool for his own monetary endeavors. Underneath the greasy undertones of his character is a lonely man who wants a woman he can never have. Tabib is admirable in the role.

Kaylon Hunt plays Lester a man who looks after himself but wants something more. He is sly, or maybe naïve, about his motives. He has a career and is cautious about getting into trouble with his partner or the woman he has taken a liking to. This character is very similar to the character in Camp Logan (see write-up).

Ben Guillory, the director, did a fantastic job showing us the humor in the play that could get downright melancholy. It was very funny without going over the edge. Scenes flowed seamlessly from end to end. (Although I didn't get the slow motion stuff in the bar. It was too much of a distraction.) Also, I found it interesting that it was set in 1941 but there was hardly a trace of the saber rattling, throughout the play.

The play focused on family, the little things, and left off the distractions of the world-view at that time. Maybe that's what the playwright, Philip Yordan, wanted: a play that was a distraction from what was going on when he wrote it in 1944. These are simple people in extraordinary circumstances, a dysfunctional family, surviving the way people survive, by any means necessary. Still, there are a lot of interesting relationship played out here with the father and daughter, mother and future son-in-law, husband and expecting wife, bartender and lonely young woman, pimp and pawn, and the family and religion and health.

There were times in this play the relationships could have been strengthened. The siblings did not appear close. We could have had a deeper meaning to give us more of what we look for in strong relationships, and moment that sends us over the emotional edge. But, for the time being, this played out just fine.

Without giving the ending away, my ending would have not stopped at the door, she would have open the door, stopped in indecision and a hand would have reached in to pull her through the door. That would have been my ending. But's that's just me.

Members of the crew of this fantastic production are:

Ben Guillory – Producer – Impeccable and wonderful production values. Wonderful work.

Anthony Aguilar – Production Stage Manager

Shanae Sharon – Assistant Stage Manager

Tom Meleck – Set Designer & Lighting Design – Fantastic job!

Naila Aladdin Sander – Costume Designer – Wonderful job! And really gave the actors the feel, the time, and place of where they were.

Eric “Cayenne” Butler – Original Music & Sound Design – Nice job!

Alejandra Cisneros – Property Design

Kathie Foley-Meyer – Graphic Designer

Philip Sokoloff – Press Representative

John Freeland, Jr. – Production Consultant

I got in very late in this production. This would have been a “Run!” but the show has closed. It was a wonderful show and The Robey Theatre Company does tremendous work!

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