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THEATER REVIEWS L.A.

PITY The PROUD ONES

Written by Kurt Dana MAXEY

Directed by Ben GUILLORY

at Robey Theater Company / LATC

Runs through to mid Nov 2011

Review by Joshua TRILIEGI

Pity the Proud Ones currently playing at The Robey Theatre Company at LATC Downtown is a complicated story to relay. It is the fourth play to be produced directly from their writers workshop which develops and assists writers in the creation of new works. For a play that takes place in a House of ill repute, it is rather tame. Presented with a formality fitting for its period. The subjects of sex, opium, slavery, and politics are handled almost as if we are watching a play that was written and performed at the time this play is set : 1915. There is much talk of history, the Cuban skirmishes of 1898 with Buffalo Soldiers, The impending war in Europe (WWI), the sinking of the Lucitania, Irish Slaves of 1649 and the Seminole Indians. But at its core, this is an old fashioned story about family, secrets, inheritance and manhood. Loyalty, money and racial history mix together and the weather always plays a part in the moods.

Estranged family members reunite under arduous conditions, in this case, the eye of a Hurricane. Although the location is set in Florida, it could be New Orleans, Cuba, maybe even Jamaica, early Australia or other territory where poor whites, enslaved and newly freed blacks come together, fall in love, go into business, have children and settle together. Protecting one's secrets, playing the society game, breaking the codes and getting ones due all come together in this five person ensemble that is tightly produced and interesting to watch. Martin O'Grady returns to the outback while a storm is brewing on the horizon. He was once a reluctant second generation pimp whom fell in love with his employee and had a son with another woman years ago. His son is an emancipated young man just a few shades darker than his irish blooded father. Apparently there is money owed and secrets afloat.

While Martin enjoys his drink and reveling in history, his son James is set on getting paid and taking to the road with Ella Mae whom works the books for the local Madame that just happens to be his Dad's ex employee and lover, Elizabeth Marie. Whom also shares business and pleasure with Pettigrew, the barkeep and somewhat of a mystery man in this tale. Elizabeth enjoys her pipe and is somewhat stuck between her past and everyone else's future. Although this is certainly an ensemble work of literature, the stand out performance when it comes to tone, period and personification is by Actor Dorian Christian Baucum playing James, who nails the style and body language in a way that allows us to truly believe where we are and that this is another time, another place. These are historical characters, but there is a mythical aspect to them. James struts and guffaws as if his best friend is the Horse he rode on to get here. With a vocal stylization and stage presence that is both commanding and endearing, we want him to get his money, pay the Madame and get free. Although his father is reluctant to do so, he too would like to see his ' boy ' become a man and by the time things are wrapped up, we witness this act. But not before we learn a few things about Martin's history, " Family is more than just blood", Elizabeth's journey , " Were all owned by something or someone. " and Jamie's dilemma, " Don't call me boy anymore."

Act two is energized by a Hurricane as well as an inspired performance by Ben Jurrand whom plays Pettigrew, a physically challenged character whom has been damaged by history in a way that we hope Jamie does not have to be. A price that earlier generations paid, so young bucks like Jamie could go out

and kick some ass, as we hear about in the opening scene. Halfway through the play, Pettigrew repeats the line " I was thinking about discretion, privacy and the K.K.K. " As if Jamie has not learned of these facts. Although there is talk of an uncle Pat whom was a priest and a Widow Fernandez whom cooks up a spicy paella, the play stays within its five person ensemble in a traditionally structured style and set piece. The work is presented not quite, ' in the round ', but perhaps as a two sided experience with the audience on either side of, and above the players, an interesting choice by the set designer, Miguel Montalvo, with costumes by Naila Aladdin Sanders. This is a spirited production which uses its space and ideas smartly and economically. I was startled when a line delivery, " Count it, its all there" was delivered late in the play, took me a while to figure out why, it appears in a book, screen play and audio CD that I wrote ten years ago. Reviewing plays is a hobby, writing my own work is a passion. Viewing this play reminded me that we all have something to contribute and sometimes those contributions overlap, mix and mingle.

Caroline Morahan as Elizabeth Marie gives an emotional performance which is striking, raw and spent, in that her character's passion was used up long ago, although she is clearly young, lovely and lovable, we see the price she paid to get this far. One thinks of previous Madame's in famous literature such as, Steinbeck' s East of Eden or Nelson Algren' s , Walk on the Wild Side and here we see something completely different. A limbo state where being in power is powerless and " Being in love is too costly". She tells us early on. Ella Mae is played by Staci Mitchell with a quiet reserve. She is a business woman to be, but we get the sense that she will never run a house of ill repute. With eyes on Jamie or Jamie to her, she could supply him with enough security so that they may create a family of their own someday. This is a play written with a heavy past and a certain future for its characters, when it come to the now moments, there aren't many. The Hurricane comes and goes, the characters resolve their differences but the damage done remains. We are left thinking about pasts, presents and uncertain futures after viewing this work. An interesting piece that conjures history, taboos and family secrets in an up close and intimate nature. We suggest this Production. I may even see this play again, later in its run, as director Ben Guillory was present and taking extensive notes, one gets the sense that this cast is just warming up.

www.RobeyTheaterCompany.com
www.TheLATC.org

Review by Joshua TRILIEGI OCT 25th 2011