

THEATER REVIEW | 'THE VERGE'

Woman on Verge of Creating the New



Sue Kessler

"The Verge": Rebecca Lingafelter plays the lead in Susan Glaspell's 1921 play, directed by Alice Reagan, at the Ontological-Hysterical Theater in the East Village.

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It would be easy to reduce "The Verge," Susan Glaspell's 1921 play, to a feminist tract. Society forces Claire Archer into the boxes it deems acceptable; in attempting to escape those boxes, Claire goes mad. But that summary ignores the work's wild heart, which, like its fragile, monstrous heroine, is somehow irreducible.

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Such irreducibility is the more resonant feminist message today, and it is given full room to breathe by the director Alice Reagan and Performance Lab 115, which is performing "The Verge" as part of

the Ontological-Hysterical Theater's Incubator program for emerging artists.

Ms. Reagan has altered Glaspell's script, conflating or eliminating several characters, condensing and editing scenes and reimagining the setting, a greenhouse where Claire (Rebecca Lingafelter) is trying to create a new kind of plant, one "that is outside what flowers have been." The Ontological's staircase is used to suggest that Claire's secretive workspace exists above the greenhouse, not below a trapdoor, as Glaspell had it. But this room of Claire's own is, in any case, a hidden one. We see her and her creaturelike assistant, Antoinette (Sara Buffamanti), mostly among men: Claire's ineffectual husband, Harry (B. Brian Argotsinger); her archly sinister lover, Richard Demming (Tuomas Hiltunen); and Tom Edgeworthy (Todd d'Amour), the man who understands her best and is therefore the greatest threat to her mad sovereignty.

"I'm fighting for my chance," she tells him, pulled taut between his offer of love and the plant's tantalizing promise of the unknown. "I don't know — which chance."

She knows that she wants nothing of her daughter (Rachel Jablin) or husband, and the proper, socialized world they represent. The greenhouse is a last stand against this world, isolated in a wintry storm and full of long tracts of dark, rich earth. Everyday objects are half-buried in the soil, as if they might be transformed, or at least neutralized. And by the end, it is clear that Claire has gone beyond the everyday.

Not all of the production's choices pay off. Video interludes (by Jeff Clarke) of voluptuously flowering plants are heavy-handed, as are the strange, gestural dances performed by Ms. Lingafelter, whose mad eyes, vocal outbursts and habitual rubbing of one forearm more elegantly suggest her trapped, spinning mind.

But the Incubator, like a greenhouse, is meant to nurture possibility. And here it has succeeded, just as Claire, in a way, succeeds herself.

"The Verge" runs through Nov. 21 at the Ontological-Hysterical Theater at St. Mark's Church, 131 East 10th Street, East Village; (212) 352-3101, ontological.com.

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