

Theater

Theater review

The Verge

Susan Glaspell's modernist weird-athon sprouts at the Ontological.

Ontological-Hysteria Theater. By Susan Glaspell. Dir. Alice Reagan. With ensemble cast. 1hr 20mins. No intermission.



At exhibitions of great modernist set designs, curators like to hang companion photos—possibly just to kill our buzz. They'll take a gorgeous Alexandra Exter design, popping with Constructivist slashes and fields of bright orange, and juxtapose it with the black-and-white picture of the realized set, which looks inevitably flimsy and dreary and cheap. Something about Alice Reagan's revival of Susan Glaspell's 1921 drama *The Verge* deflates us in the same way, and it's not just Jennifer de Fouchier's *Man Ray*-esque set, all white diagonals and flat lighting. The problem is Glaspell's play, a nutty tragedy that starts out as screwball and takes a sharp left into expressionist angst—the tonal shifts happen at such breakneck speed, Reagan and her seemingly unprepared company get collective whiplash.

The plot involves botanist Claire (a delightfully mad-eyed Rebecca Lingafelter), whose dedication to her experiments overpowers her other connections: She turns her back on husband, lover, daughter and soulmate; she even turns her back on sanity, and her long, weird rants about the necessity of breaking apart the status quo ("Look deep! No turning back!") should, of course, be read in a feminist light. (Glaspell is best known for *Trifles*, a forensic dismantling of male superiority.) It's also clear that *The Verge* needs careful tending: Glaspell's prose is a hybrid of 19th-century speechifying and 20th-century poetics, and the result seems dense and weedy, though potentially exciting. Sadly, the author's strangeness utterly overwhelms Reagan, who wields only uneasy stylizations in her defense. It's certainly useful to see a play that's so infrequently done, but it's a shame we have to see it so grossly underfertilized.—*Helen Shaw*