

The Verge

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Fred Backus · November 7, 2009

Susan Glaspell's 1921 play *The Verge* should probably be better known than it is today, but if producers and artists have largely shied away from this provocative play over the past 90 years or so it's not entirely surprising. *The Verge* has the seemingly irreconcilable elements of a parlor-room comedy, feminist critique, and a celebration of the individual artistic spirit over constraining social norms, but Glaspell's strikingly expressionistic play—like the botanical creations of its main character—burns through all of these artistic trappings into something beyond these familiar forms. *The Verge*, which apparently baffled and antagonized many of its critics when it first opened, remains unflinching and uncompromising today. In mounting their version of this piece, Performance Lab 115 has brought to fruition a production that is boldly and disturbingly unique.

To create something boldly and perhaps disturbingly unique is also the aim of *The Verge*'s heroine, Claire Archer. As the play begins, the incandescence of Claire's personality has already attracted an almost slavishly devoted servant, Antoinette, a doting husband, Harry, and two suitors—Dick and Tom—like moths to a flame, but the increasingly erratic Claire has focused her time and insuppressible energy to the study of botany. Specifically, Claire is trying to create new and unique forms of botanical life, and whether those forms are better or beautiful is not something that interests her in the least as she pours herself into the quest to break free of all existing structures and patterns. This is also the quest of Claire for herself; not content to be merely the most interesting or vivacious person in the room, she pushes away from what "is" towards what could be in a frenzy that threatens to bring down all those around her.

Glaspell may be best known for feminist plays, and while *The Verge* may seem like one at first, the designation doesn't come near to being adequate in expressing it. Unlike, say, the heroine of Sophie Treadwell's more-often-produced *Machinal* written around the same time, Claire isn't dominated or oppressed by the men who

surround her—in fact she has them all pretty much under her thumb. Her trio of admirers—an aviator, an abstract painter, and a philosopher—are hardly bastions of conformity or power, and her henpecked husband Harry's demands on her amount to little more than asking for civility, heat (as opposed to only her greenhouse being heated), and that she not flaunt her affairs right before him in the company of others. Certainly it's a man's world outside Claire's greenhouse, and that isn't overlooked by either Glaspell or Claire, but it's hard to imagine Claire being any less defiant in world where men didn't exist. Claire rejects not merely some pre-ordained role of woman but any sort of defining or limiting role at all, even the role of an adored and free-spirited eccentric.

Instead, Claire's nonconformity is total and uncompromising, so much so that *The Verge* directly and purposefully challenges the audience to sympathize with her. While it's not hard to be amused by Claire's unyielding behavior with her Tom, Dick, and Harry, it's harder to find affection for her in her cruelty towards a daughter she can find no love or empathy for. As an artist she seems more concerned with what her artistry can destroy than with what it can create, and Glaspell pushes the envelope further by making Claire's "art" biological life: she becomes monstrous both in her taking credit as the creator as well as her capacity to kill those creations she finds displeasure with. In her pursuit of the essential and unknowable, Claire leaves scorched earth in her wake, and part of what makes *The Verge* so fascinating is that it doesn't seem to romanticize Claire's journey. Part of what makes it so provocative is that it doesn't seem to condemn Claire's actions either.

Director Alice Reagan and her collaborators at Performance Lab 115 have bravely and skillfully held the course in this, probing the complexities of Glaspell's script without proclaiming judgment either way in what amounts to a stylish and effective production. This is notably true in the production's handling of the men in Claire's life. Both the neurotic Harry and the breezy Dick are slightly absurd as written—and B. Brian Argotsinger and Tuomas Hiltunen in these respective roles keep that absurdity present but slight enough so that their feelings and intentions cannot simply be dismissed. Todd D'Amour's performance as Tom—the true emotional love of Claire's life—simmers with intensity, making Claire's decision whether to accept or reject him one of emotional consequence.

But ultimately the show rests on Rebecca Lingafelter's shoulders, and she does a remarkable job making Claire fascinating enough to invest in while resisting any temptation to invoke victimhood or reduce her as simply "mad." In Lingafelter's performance, Glaspell's evocative and at times purposefully unnatural dialogue doesn't just seem spontaneous, but as if her discoveries are exploding for the first time inside her mind.

The production as a whole is just stylized enough to give the performances a dreamlike quality—as if we are seeing inside and beyond the social niceties bathed in a sort of mystical moonlight—and design-wise this quality is particularly enhanced by Jennifer de Fouchier's simple but vivid set where the moon features prominently. The centerpiece is the white path skewed at an angle through Claire's greenhouse, seemingly setting Claire's journey of discovery on a moonbeam which narrows to some unseen event horizon back through the doors to the knowable, and which expands unseen offstage to the Great Beyond.

The defining moments of Claire's journey in the play take place along this path, a journey where Claire defiantly tries to transform her world into something enthralling and unexpected. In this she may have found kindred spirits in Performance Lab 115, who in this production have succeeded in creating something enthralling and unexpected themselves.

VENUE
Ontological Theatre

OPENED
November 5, 2009

CLOSED
November 21, 2009

RUNNING TIME
1 hour, 30 minutes
No Intermission

CREATORS & ARTISTS

Cast
Sara Buffamanti, B. Brian Argotsinger, Rebecca Lingafelter, Tuomas Hiltunen, Todd d'Amour, Rachel Jablin, Birgit Huppuch

Author
Susan Glaspell

Director
Alice Reagan

Sound
Mark Valadez

Costumes
Lucrecia Briceno

Sets
Jennifer de Fouchier

Video
Jeff Clarke

Stage Manager
Liz Nielsen

Producer
Performance Lab 115