



Moving truth about middle-age escape

Simple human story refreshingly told from woman's point of view

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'Harper Regan' ★ ★ ★ ★

Early in "Harper Regan," the exquisitely directed, gorgeously acted and profoundly moving new show at the storefront Steep Theatre, the 40ish title character has to ask her employer for a simple leave of absence to visit her dying dad. She has not yet had the chance to tell her father how much she loves him.

If you've ever had to stand there in pain, enduring the quixotic, self-serving ramblings of a boss, especially a younger boss, who coldly controls the terms of the job you desperately need for the sake of your family, the recognizable inhumanity of this devastating little scene will shake you all the way to your boots.

The greatest theater -- and this is one of those great, not-to-be-missed, only-in-Chicago productions -- is invariably rooted in simple human honesty. Even five minutes into this intimate and wrenching show, you know your heart is going to ache for Kendra Thulin's lovable lost soul. In this simple but truly beautiful performance, Thulin and her director, Robin Witt, get a crucial thing right. They allow you to see yourself in her struggle. Whoever you may be.

Simon Stephens' "Harper Regan," which premiered in 2008 at London's National Theatre, is, in essence, a play about an ordinary Englishwoman's existential crisis in the middle of a recession. It is about that lonely but oft-unavoidable middle-age moment when career options have narrowed, marriage has turned challenging, children have retreated and old family wounds gape wider than ever. But it belongs, recognizably, to an economic moment when workers are suffering.

On this day, Harper decides she cannot take the drip-drip anymore. She walks.

What makes this play so sad and wise is that Harper has, of course, no place to go.

No caring, middle-age parents with responsibilities and imperfect-but-needy spouses can ever really leave. Harper's journey includes raw attempts at sexual coupling (one assignation with an older man is so sad it had me in tears), an agonizing confrontation with a parent, a hapless attempt to be with the young, and to be young again herself. She learns of the imperfections of life, the impossibility of return and the poison of regret.

Other plays have mined this territory (albeit mostly from a male perspective) and we've seen Stephens' melancholy but compassionate writing in Chicago before. Griffin Theatre had great success with his "On the Shore of the Wide World." But "Harper Regan" is a vastly superior and storefront-friendlier play that Witt pours into the embracing Steep space with exquisite delicacy, zest and texturing. She has cast this beautifully paced show pitch-perfectly. Everyone surrounding Thulin raises their game -- from Caroline Neff (who plays her deliciously oblivious daughter) to Curtis Jackson (her inappropriate young friend), to Peter Moore (her spouse, with debilitating demons of his own).

Thulin nails this role in so many ways: the vulnerability, the heart, the irony, the social reality and, perhaps most important of all, the determination that must drive a desperate dramatic character.

I don't know if Stephens was hoping for a U.S. premiere more glamorous than in a storefront under the "L." But his work could not have been better served. Don't let the seriousness of the theme deter you from seeing this beautiful, not-to-be-missed show. Stephens (and Witt) find much humor in life's trials, and Harper finds some kind of way through in the end. It's the only way any of us can ever find, really.

Thank God. I'm not sure I could have borne it if life had entirely kicked her to the curb.

When: Through Feb. 27

Where: Steep Theatre Company, 1115 W. Berwyn Ave.

Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes

Tickets: \$18 at 312-458-0722 and steeptheatre.com

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