

Entertainment

Plank

by Kilian Melloy
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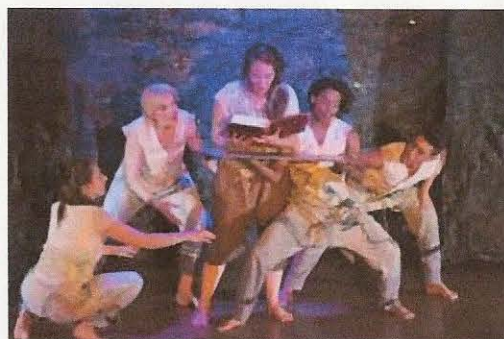
Poornima Kirby as Potpee in 'Plank' (Source:Joan Mejia)

As my plus one and I left the Boston Center for the Arts after the press performance of the new play "Plank," produced by the equally new [Alley Cat Theater](#) and continuing through Sept. 16 at the BCA, he shook his head and told me that he was "so angry" at the play.

I bring this up because our different reactions will probably be reflected on a larger scale for the play's audiences.

My friend found the play's first scenes -- during which Potpee (Poornima Kirby) drifts alone on the ocean, clinging to a plank of wood and learning to live in the moment -- to be boring. By contrast, he found the play's second half -- after Potpee washes ashore and confronts human society once again in the forms of the brashly bossy Mercedes (Liz Adams) and the sweet, deceptively smart Thimble (Sydney Grant) -- to be pretentious and empty of original ideas.

To be honest, I could see his points though I didn't entirely agree. (If only the Boston theater scene had an "Siskel and Ebert" sort of program for plays! We could have had a ball with this one.)



(Source:Joan Mejia)

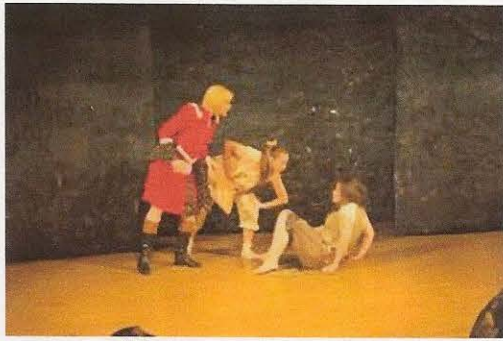
"Plank" is written by Alley Cat's founder, John Greiner-Ferris, late of Boston Public Works. It's a play that's defiantly at odds with surface images and easy conformities. There are long, long pauses in "Plank" -- and they are written into the script. If you're in a hurry for the play to take you some place you might well grow impatient, because "Plank" doesn't play by those rules.

In fact, rules are what Greiner-Ferris, and "Plank," are taking square aim at. The first half, when Potpee drifts on her plank, is eerie, hypnotic, and

dreamlike; Barbara Craig's lighting is marine, if not submarine, dimly done in strobing hues of green and blue. Ned Singh's sound design and the original music by Peter Warren and Matt Somalis complete the mood. You almost start to feel like you are drifting out of your seat, and into a briny (maybe amniotic) realm where both disbelief and everyday reality are suspended. These minutes have an experimental quality to them, and a somnambulant atmosphere. Are we dreaming? Is Potpee? Is this ocean actually some sort of afterlife, before-life, or in-between

place?

The ocean, Potpee discovers, is a living being, and rather than having a single unified identity it throws up several distinct personae. Chop (Adams), Swell (Fray Cordero), Spume (Grant), and Fetch (Adam Lokken) swirl playfully around Potpee, discussing her amongst themselves. "I've heard tell of this creature," Spume notes. "It lives on land." Helpfully, the ocean's various aspects guide Potpee to the plank and then direct the essentials of survival her way: A sandwich, a bottle of soda, a book. "Call me Ishmael," Potpee reads aloud.



Mercedes (Liz Adams) and Thimble (Sydney Grant) encounter Potpee (Poornima Kirby) (Source:Joan Mejia)

There are long passages in which Potpee drifts and the others roil in a kind of body-entangling modern dance all around her. (No movement designer is credited in the program, though Grant and Lokken are both described as choreographers in their biographies.) For some, this interval -- which takes about a third of the total running time -- might feel interminable. It's fair enough to give warning to those with a low tolerance for modern dance or the kind of movie in which a static camera observes a tree or a landscape in breathless anticipation of transformations sudden or gradual.

But for those for whom waiting and watching feels less taxing than rewarding, and for whom slow narrative unwinding plays like a prelude to whatever lies in store, this opening feels like a washing clean -- of expectation, of desire, of the mind's busyness. When Potpee washes up and begins a satirical dialectic with Mercedes, Thimble throwing in juicy little asides and observances along the way, the audience, like Potpee, will have been scrubbed of concerns like time, identity, and to-do lists.

But it's at this second, land-based half that the play runs aground. The lighting is now bright; it's time to focus on particulars, and the play's detailing of the philosophical gap between the innocent Potpee (innocent in an original, Edenic sense; she doesn't even watch TV) and the status-obsessed, control-freak Mercedes (clad in garishly patriotic colors that make her resemble a Sarah Palin cheerleader) feels undernourished. We certainly pick up on Greiner-Ferris' unwillingness to be bullied by a world in which categorization and pigeonholing are preferred managerial means, and concerns with security have long since overridden personal liberties. But what we don't get is a sense of fine-attuned dissection -- of Greiner-Ferris picking apart his gripes in a rigorous manner.

Instead, this examination of civilization and its disillusionments tends toward the broad and nebulous. Edward Albee did something similar with his original version of "Seascape," in which a third act nested awkwardly between two others. In that excised act (restored a few seasons ago when Zeitgeist Stage Company produced the play) a pair of submarine creatures -- smart, but puzzled at the quirks of human beings -- carry out an exchange with a pair of landlubbers. The effect was cheesy and dramatically thin, like a rote episode of "Star Trek." There are no aliens in "Plank" -- marine or extraterrestrial -- but the sense of inadequately limned alienation is much the same.



Sydney Grant as Thimble (Source:Joan Mejia)

We do get plenty of humor, though, some of it thanks to Adams' pert, officious, and comically broad reading, but much of it built into Greiner-Ferris' script -- along with some feverish, demanding philosophical tropes and, gratifyingly, a nice twist in which Potpee's Zennish/Buddist-like/New Agey perspective corkscrews into serious self-doubt. The big questions have plenty of room to stretch and breathe here: Are we as smart as we think we are? Are we, as human beings or as civilized creatures, any improvement at all over the instinct-driven creatures we look down upon, or the insensate processes of nature itself?

The metaphorical thrust is overt and deliberately so: Life is like, well, drifting alone on a great ocean, clinging to the slenderest means of staying afloat. But while that condition could be terrifying and provoke a wish for security and stability at any cost, it's also an invitation to a different sort of experience. Potpee, in trying to describe it to the uncomprehending Mercedes, makes it sound like an out-of-body sojourn in which one's soul hurtles along on a primal Om. But how much can we trust such rare -- or extreme -- moments, which take us completely out of ordinary life? Do they offer wisdom and constructive alternatives, or exist independent of practical (and therefore life-sustaining) considerations?

Greiner-Ferris asks the right questions, and he rightly holds back from trying to give us answers that might not even exist. But does he succeed in getting his audience to ask those sorts of questions in turn? For some, he will. Others will roll their eyes and stew. Arguably, it's when the two camps discuss the play that its full effect will take hold.

"Plank" continues through Sept. 16 at the BCA. For tickets and more information, please go to <http://www.alleycattheater.org/plank.html>

Kilian Melloy serves as EDGE Media Network's Assistant Arts Editor. He also reviews theater for WBUR. His professional memberships include the National Lesbian & Gay Journalists Association, the Boston Online Film Critics Association, The Gay and Lesbian Entertainment Critics Association, and the Boston Theater Critics Association's Elliot Norton Awards Committee.

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