



Arnott of the Arts

The Little Prince review

The Yale Cabaret would appear to have a natural affinity for Antoine de Saint-Exupery's *The Little Prince*: like the Prince's home, the Cabaret is strange, small, enchanted planet where things happen much more frequently than they do at other, similar, places. While it's disappointing that the Cabaret was unable to get the permission to develop their own script from St. Exupery's immortal classic (using a serviceable established version by Rick Cummins and John Scoullar instead), director Katherine Owuor and a stellar cast of Yale School of Drama students illuminate the text brilliantly—as regularly, you could say, as a lamplighter who lives on a planet where the days only last one minute.

Owuor—a Russian-born student of the sciences who comes to the Cabaret from outside its accustomed Drama School sphere, has paced and probed the show so that it unfolds as the philosophical exercise it is, not as the absurdist cut-ups it could too easily devolve into with a less talented director. The leisurely tone makes no excuses for itself, and is ideal for carefully relating such a delicate story.

The cast is a dream one for such a dreamscape. I've seen Carter Gill in an assortment of whiny and pushy character roles in Yale shows. As the *Little Prince*, he affects a blissful calm totally at odds with the freneticism usually expected of him, and is no less comfortable in that softer skin. It's hard to do gentleness convincingly, and he does.

Alex Knox and Rachel Spencer are enlisted to play four supporting characters each. Knox is the creator of the silent mask-and-movement sensation *Eye*, which played the Yale Summer Cabaret twice in successive summers; he's a consummate comic cameo player. Spencer adds a needed femininity to the proceedings, even when she's essaying blustery men.

Finally and foremost, Barret O'Brien, who played *Peer Gynt* at the YSD last year, finds himself on another odd odyssey as *The Pilot*. O'Brien has perfected a personal acting style which would be wasted anywhere except close-at-hand theater; not only is he always "on" (in this show, he laboriously takes notes and nods his head while the Prince describes his royal sojourns to other worlds) has a magical way of involving and acknowledging the audience while leaving the fourth wall intact.

I'm not much for audience participation, but ever since I started seeing O'Brien act, I've wanted to be on the other end of one of his eye-contact pauses. I got my wish Thursday night, when he spoke a line about the wonders of innocent children and nodded, portentously yet almost imperceptibly in my direction. I was the aubliminal target because I was holding my 4-year-old daughter Sally on my lap. Both my daughters, who have a familiarity with the Cabaret and the book of *The Little Prince*, were rapt throughout almost the entire performance, even though the production made none of the usual (and unnecessary) "children's theater" efforts to coddle or talk down to the. The kids only got antsy—and I saw the glazed looks on other tykes in attendance as well—at the very end, when there's a whole lot of summing-up and very little to look at. But during that beautiful concluding speech by *The Pilot*, that's when I noticed several adults crying. A moving experience for all ages, this.

Nice to have such a wistful, dreamy Cabaret experience in the wake of last week's caterwaul, *Funny as Hell*, which was the kind of one-man-against-the-world screed which sells itself as singular and original yet has become a distressingly large subgenre of the small theater realm. *Funny as Hell* had some tantalizing ideas and melodies in it, but tried too hard to shock and dismay. *The Little Prince*, on the other hand, brought enlightenment through contemplation, not confrontation. A subtle example of the new Obama era we find ourselves in after years of shouting at walls.

The *Little Prince* has one more night of performances, 8 & 11 p.m. tonight (Saturday, Jan. 24) at the Yale Cabaret, 217 Park St., New Haven, (203) 432-1566, www.yalecabaret.org.

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