

Critics' Forum

Theater

Saroyan Play No Day "At the Beach..."

By Aram Kouyoumdjian

Over the course of his decades-long career, Aram Saroyan has achieved a certain status in the world of letters by composing in genres ranging from poetry to fiction to memoir. Now, Saroyan, who has about a dozen published books to his credit, has ventured into drama. His first play, "At the Beach House," is currently enjoying its world premiere at The Lost Studio (in a limited run through November 27). What prompts such a late-career shift? Perhaps the search for a new challenge. Or perhaps the need for catharsis, as may be the case in this instance.

Infused with autobiographical elements, "At the Beach House" explores the dynamics of a family confronting long-ignored (or long-repressed) issues during a single day of reckoning. That certainly resonates of "Long Day's Journey Into Night," Eugene O'Neill's primer on familial unraveling, especially since both plays feature a key female character struggling with a form of drug addiction.

In Saroyan's play, that character is Angela, the grown daughter of Wanda Harrow, and she is nursing a heroin habit at the titular beach house of her stepfather, Clyde Harrow, a movie actor in the twilight of his years. The play's minimal plot revolves around the efforts by Angela's relatives (and her abusive ex-lover) to intervene and stop her self-destructive behavior. Endless conversations ensue about the evils of heroin (as if this were a revelation), but little else happens, except that Clyde suffers a broken ankle. Still, the play manages to be messy anyway, as the script meanders amidst tangential stories, many of which unfold offstage and are devoid of both dramatic tension and development.

Adding to the clutter are superfluous characters populating the world of the play. Indeed, no less than four of the play's ten characters are entirely dispensable, beginning with a young jogger who appears in the opening scene, engages in small talk with Angela (we need a catalyst for exposition, after all), and then disappears, never to be seen or mentioned again.

Saroyan makes an earnest effort to probe the dysfunctions that complicate the bonds of family – the destructive effects of conditional love, for instance, and the psychological wounds that can be inflicted by physically absent fathers and emotionally unavailable mothers. But trite lines manage to creep into the dialogue, detracting from its polish, and the writing lacks the true depth and insight that make O'Neill's work a hallmark of American theater.

Nevertheless, Saroyan constructs some strong passages in Angela's scenes with her mother (Nancy Jeris, showcasing natural flair) and grandmother (Dena Dietrich, displaying zestful spirit). These scenes convey the importance of roots in the formative process – a theme that must have particular poignance for Saroyan, given his pedigree.

What may be the play's most moving image frames the three women reclining side by side on beach chairs, watching the sun set and marking an end to the arduous day.

Director Marcia Rodd has assembled a cast with strong credentials, yet the production, as a whole, is not well served by many of the individual performances. Orson Bean, who commands top billing because of his relative fame, is fortunately relegated to a smallish part as Angela's stepfather. The underwritten role often requires him to spew obscenities, which Bean does with all the nuance of a Tourette's patient. He's not as interested in acting so much as mugging for the audience – a transgression that is particularly shameless in Act I. However, a dud of a twist at the end of that act – with the set-up of a bang, but the delivery of a whimper – thankfully takes him out of the action for much of Act II.

Lisa Glass, as Angela, also turns in a performance marred by artifice. Reliant on a fake laugh and rote gestures – to indicate, alternately, annoyance and frustration – her portrayal lacks the complexity necessary to render her character compelling or worthy of understanding, if not sympathy.

The only performance that rings consistently true belongs to Jake Eberle. As Angela's brother, Eberle eases into his character's skin and explores his inner conflicts in a layered depiction that eludes Glass until the play's final moments.

The whole production clocks in at a mere 90 minutes (plus an intermission), but by the time the pat ending arrives in the form of a "coda," the experience feels somewhat like a long night's journey into day.

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Aram Kouyoumdjian is the winner of Elly Awards for both playwriting ("The Farewells") and directing ("Three Hotels"). His performance piece, "Protest," is currently being staged at the Finborough Theatre in London.

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