

There Is a Happiness That Morning Is, by Mickle Maher.

Directed by John Sowle. Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman, *Berkshire Bright Focus*

"So easy to confuse my panic for passion."



Brian Petti, Molly Parker Myers; photo: John Sowle

Passion isn't the only word that begins with "p"; there is also pain, persistence, pallor, predictability, palpable, predicament, to name just a few. Mickle Maher's play "There Is a Happiness That Morning Is," deals with all of these and more. Written around 2010-2011 this play tells the unrelenting story of two college instructors, both of whom teach William Blake's poetry at the same small New England college, who secretly are lovers. One night, drunk on poetry, they make love on the college quad in front of the student body, and others, and the next morning they have to face the consequences of their embarrassing act of passion. He addresses his morning class on Blake's Songs of Innocence and she teaches her afternoon class on Blake's Songs of Experience. Neither one is prepared for the predicament their actions have precipitated.

The play is written, for the most part, in rhymed couplets, the form used by William Blake. This is a format other playwrights have used, and it lies easily on the ears once you grow accustomed to the rhythm. Poetry, basically, is considered the language of love and while this play concerns both love and lovers, it is really quite a bit more than just that. It is a story about obsession. It is a tale of how one man's demanding devotion to a subject brings both triumph and terror to two people who never know how their situation has been manipulated to serve the needs of a third party. Even in the wake of their foolish public act of lust and love, they are not abandoned by their onlooker. They have been commanded to make public apologies for the aggressive passions, followed by the panic of exclusion that has kept them separate and alone in the surrounding woodland hills. He will do it; she will not.

She has been drained by the experience, her pallor grey and wan. He has been energized by their public appearance, enthused by his palpable hit. When he invades her classroom, bringing panic into her controlled and presumably safe space, she becomes leonine, fierce and defiant. Their duality here is like a dance of death played out before her students, many of whom are also his students. The students, us in the audience, wait for some sort of conclusion to their now embattled romance. That wait doesn't take long and what is revealed in the final twenty minutes of the play is the play's full focus, a constant litany of revelations about human relations and human failings.

Teacher One, Bernard, is played by Brian Petti. Bernard is a well-known folk-singer whose interest in Blake has led him into a teaching career in a far-away safe place something like Bennington College in rural Vermont. Petti presents a folky image in this role, garbed in clothing

designed by Michelle Rogers that allow him the casual look of a New England farmer. Petti makes this outfit seem so very appropriate to his role as an educator/entertainer. If he had a mandolin or zither slung over his shoulder it would complete the picture perfectly. His Bernard has a delicate charm that converts to instant ardor when he speaks of his embarrassing act. A plain but attractive man, Petti's Bernard becomes a recognizably romantic figure as he spouts both Blake and Bernard in those rhymed couplets Maher has written for him. He beautifully presents the image of a romantic who never realizes his peculiar power to place a patina of purity on his basest actions. This is very nicely played on the Bridge Street stage.

His counterpart in the public act, and twenty years of private actions, Ellen, is played by Molly Parker Myers. Ellen is a woman for whom passion has an impassable presence. Every word, every movement speaks of her passions. She has been driven by her indiscretion to a vivid, livid understanding of how love will impact her future. She is an exponent of four-letter words, a believer in telling it like it is, of looking at any real situation realistically even when she is persuaded by her own arguments against a passionate pronouncement to speak only passionate observations. Her fury, her frustration, her phenomenal frequent obeisances to herself give Myers the perfect platform for resigning herself to a dismal future. The actress makes it clear that the teacher she portrays is anathema to herself. She is brilliant portraying the dichotomy of Ellen. From her first entrance to her final moments, torn between her desires and her concerns, her cancer and her canker, Myers gives amazing life to the poetic soul of this woman.

The college President, James Dean, is played by Steven Patterson. Dean is also torn apart by the actions of two of his favorite instructors. He works his way into an emotional snit as he tries to convince them that a public apology is not only necessary but that it is essential for all three of them. Like the classical theater tradition of the "deus ex machina" Patterson's President Dean tells more than he should, reveals more than is seemingly possible and in doing so leaves the hallowed position of "man-in-charge" to become a supremely passionate partner in the disgrace of the college experience. It is a most powerful performance, one that leaves everyone, including the audience, breathless. Revelations do that.

The most unusual play of the season, Bridge Street Theatre's production of this work by the Chicago-based, Bennington College primed playwright, director, actor, producer is a do-not-miss ninety minutes of pure delight. Although perhaps "pure" is the wrong word here. But perhaps not. One man's passion is another man's poison, after all.

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