

Strong performances and direction mark Lab Theater's reprisal of 'House of Yes' (Photos)



The cast. (Tom Hall, 2013)



Thomas Hall
Arts & Exhibits Examiner

August 11, 2013

Thanksgiving has come to Fort Myers early this year. And it has brought with it the season's first land-falling hurricane since Charley. The vortex of cyclonic activity can be found at the Laboratory Theater on Woodford Street in the form of Kathleen Taylor's psychotically manipulative Jackie-O.

Jackie-O is the wickedly twisted twin who manipulates her mother and brothers in Wendy MacLeod's disturbingly witty *noir* *comédie* *The House of Yes*. The play draws its title from graffiti the playwright saw scribbled on a bathroom wall one day. It read

"We live in a house of yes," conjuring images in MacLeod's fertile mind of Edgar Allan Poe, pornography and amorality, but more than that, people who've never been told no by anyone - beginning with their upper crust, over-indulgent parents. And Jackie-O personifies the result of their kind of highbrow parental permissiveness.

Taylor grabs the audience from the jump with her breathy just-home-from-the-mental-hospital foot-stomping rants and tempestuous outbursts. So much so that long before the matriarchal Mrs. Pascal ever sets a pedantic foot on stage, the audience is already angry with Nancy Antonio's character for failing to spank the tantrum out of her daughter when she was still a bratty child.

But the audience has little time to ponder why Jackie-O is the way that she is. Was she spoilt by her mother's incessant coddling? Or (more likely) does her impulse to take care of her twin in every way stem from some distorted maternal impulse that was triggered by her mother's neglect and disregard of brother Marty, a situation that persists to present day. Whatever the cause, Jackie-O's Taylor-made squalls, down drafts and micro bursts have the audience grasping their armrests with white knuckles lest they be blown out of their tufted seats.

You see, *The House of Yes* has incest at its demented core, and director Nykkie Rizley wants to rub the audience's nose in the storied sexual taboo. She achieves the desired result through a plethora of theatrical devices, not the least of which is contrast. Take *The House of Yes*' two seduction scenes. Anthony and Lesly's coitus is shrouded by distance and shadows. By contrast, Jackie-O and Marty's carnal reunion takes place mere inches from the audience under a stage light that leaves little to the imagination. Where Anthony and Lesly seem to do the deed with their clothes on, the audience watches with mouths agape while the clumsy, fumbling Marty removes his sister's tiny red thong. And where Anthony's climax with Lesly is embarrassingly brief, the twins grunt, groan and roll over each other so long and so loudly that by the time they are spent, the audience has nearly squirmed their way out of the all too intimate theater to run screaming down Second or Woodford Street.

To catch you up on the action in this tightly-plotted play, Jackie-O fully intended all along to rekindle her incestuous relationship with twin brother Marty as soon as he arrived home for Thanksgiving. But when Marty unexpectedly brings his ersatz fiancée Lesly home to meet his obscenely dysfunctional family for the very first time, her plans appear to be derailed. But Jackie-O has allies. First, there's younger brother Anthony, who's dropped out of Princeton to take care of the coo-coo-for-Cocoa-Puffs Jackie following her discharge from a mental hospital. And then there's the siblings' murderous mom, who blithely admits upon meeting the unsuspecting Lesly that she was so promiscuous in her youth she really has no idea who fathered Marty and Jackie-O or even Anthony for that matter.

But what Mother Enabler does know is that Marty's impending nuptials threaten the happiness of her clinically insane daughter, and Mrs. Pascal will do anything to break the couple up, including encouraging little bro Anthony to seduce the donut shop cutie so that the twins can be alone to re-enact Jack Kennedy's assassination in the back seat of his Presidential Lincoln on the Friday before Thanksgiving, 1963.

Jackie-O got her nickname, we learn, because when she was young she once dressed for a party attired in a pink outfit like the one Jackie Kennedy famously wore the day her husband was assassinated. But not only did Jackie-O smear the dress and jacket with blood, she adorned both with cooked macaroni meant to look like splattered brains. The twins assassination re-enactment is their version of foreplay, but JFK's assassination also holds significance for the rest of the family. That's because Mrs. Pascal's husband walked out on his family on the very day JFK was assassinated. (Or did Mrs. Pascal murder him and have youngest child Anthony bury his body in the backyard of their elegant home in the suburbs of D.C. which, coincidentally, abuts the Kennedy clan's Virginia compound.)

But even though Lesly surreptitiously watches the twins JFK head shot re-enactment and ensuing lovemaking and Marty learns that Lesly cheated contemporaneously with his little brother, Marty is so repulsed by his role in the ongoing Pascal family dysfunctionality that he begs Lesly to take him back and away from the rest of his nut-job clan. This sends his territorial sister over the edge. Before Marty and Lesly can flee, Jackie-O begins the re-enactment game once more, only this time the gun isn't empty. She kills Marty with a shot to the head, thereby bringing the play and the Pascal family saga to its logical albeit unexpected bloody denouement.

"It is a great mistake to imagine the play as 'camp' because the characters pretend to be Jack and Jackie Kennedy," playwright MacLeod wrote in August of 1995. "To do the play that way is to undermine its emotional truth, and the love, however twisted, between the characters. Mrs. Pascal desperately loves her daughter and is trying to protect her, and the twins love each other deeply, tragically. However to speak of such things is 'déclassé, and the characters only allow themselves that luxury at one or two points in the play. It is that tension between the Noel Coward veneer and the Pinteresque subtext that makes the play both funny and moving."

Nykkie Rizley's interpretation of the play is indeed funny and moving, but what makes the local re-enactment of *The House of Yes* so impactful are the strong performances of the cast. Todd Fleck plays the incongruously submissive Marty Pascal to perfection. Adam Kazmarz's portrayal of the dry-witted but obsequious Anthony is fun and engrossing. Nancy Antonio gives a brilliantly restrained and subtle interpretation to the criminally narcissistic Mother Pascal, who is so unconnected with son Marty that his only value to her is as his sister's forbidden paramour. Terra Nicole Miller is convincing as the guileless, low-socio-economic-

class Lesly, who is a metaphorical pawn of the soulless upper class and a literal pawn in the chess game between her fiance and his diabolical twin sister.

But make no mistake. Kathleen Taylor dominates *The House of Yes* cast just as Jackie-O dominates the members of the Pascal family. No matter who's on stage or delivering lines, the audience's attention remains riveted on Taylor throughout the 128-minute production. Taylor is mesmerizing, disturbing and unbelievably authentic as the crazy, controlling, amoral sibling femme fatale. Or perhaps it is her believability that makes this performance of *The House of Yes* so darn good.

The Laboratory Theater of Florida boasts a rare combination of ensemble and artistic risk, advancing classic pieces and unique local performers. It is a company that strives to present the human experience in all its rich diversity. The Lab Theater actors receive a wide array of theatrical training so that they can capably deliver strong messages that remain with audiences long after the final bow.

The Laboratory Theater of Florida is located at 1630 Woolford Street, just east of Fowler and Hough Streets in downtown Fort Myers. There remain four more performances of *The House of Yes*: Friday, August 16, Saturday, August 17, Friday, August 23, and Saturday, August 24. Getting tickets is ridiculously easy. Just go online and purchase and print off your tickets or call 239-218-0481.

Report this content