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Theater review: Theatre Vertigo's haunting "Pterodactyls"

Posted by bajohnso October 27, 2008 11:34AM

Is the human race going the way of the dinosaurs? Are we nearing the end of the line?

In Nicky Silver's absurdist take on the American family, "Pterodactyls," now receiving a generally playful and sometimes haunting production from Theatre Vertigo, such questions are front and center.

Silver focuses his attention on the affluent Duncan family as it is seen through the eyes of the returning prodigal son, Todd. We meet Todd's bank president dad, Arthur, and his society woman mom, Grace, as well as his troubled sister, Emma, and her boyfriend, Tommy.

Mom and Dad seem dead set on maintaining the facade of an ideal family life, but distressing realities disrupt the pretty picture. The AIDS epidemic, financial insecurity, incestuous desires, and sexual abuse prompt the various characters to seek escape through emotional repression, hypochondria, alcoholism, insanity, or self-destruction. In short, the Duncan family suffers a demise which at least in general outline parallels that of our large, now extinct, reptilian predecessors.

While this kind of expose of the American family is old hat today as it was in 1993 when the play was first performed, Silver's tragic-farce of denial and despair still abounds in laughs even as its razor sharp edge cuts painfully deep.

For Silver it is most important that productions of the play maintain this "juxtaposition of broad comedy and utter despair...that these conflicting spirits not become muddy." Thankfully Theatre Vertigo is successful in this regard. While there are occasional awkward moments, director Tamara Carroll's energetic company successfully negotiates the play's complex tonal shifts.

As Todd, Alec Wilson gives the production a firm foundation. There is nothing sentimental about his portrait of the Duncan scion. He occasionally show sympathy for the other characters, but his impatience with them is never far from the surface. Jennifer Healey's Grace may seem a little forced at the start, but she impressively finds her way into the character so that by the end we clearly see both Grace's desperate struggle to hold her world together and her losing battle against bitterness.

Rick Sanders certainly looks the part of a self-satisfied banker Dad, but he also gives this character's fascination with his daughter a creepy turn. As Emma, Amy Newman gives us another of her strangely droll portraits of a young neurotic woman, and as her boyfriend, Tommy, Kurt Conroyd humorously plays out the character's fidgety, sexually confusion.

As usual Theatre Vertigo makes efficient use of design elements - especially clever here is Ben Plont and Rusty Weise's scenery which presents the Duncan living room as a natural history museum exhibit representing the habitat of a once but apparently no longer thriving homo Americanus.

Continues 8 p.m. Thursday - Saturday, through November 22; Theater!  
Theatre!, 3430 S.E. Belmont St.; \$15; [www.theatrevertigo.org](http://www.theatrevertigo.org) or 503-306-0870.



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