



A CurtainUp Review The Cataract

By Liza Zapol
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Hear me out, Dan! I lifted up the eyelid and I got hold of a tiny corner. I thought maybe it was a bit of string or something, because you and Lottie are always darning. But no, Dan, no, I started pulling and the pulling just didn't stop. I pulled out this flower, this flower that is called an iris. --- Dinah

The title of Lisa D'Amour's latest play draws from the more esoteric meaning of Cataract - a series of river rapids and small waterfalls in St. Anthony Falls in Minneapolis in the late 1800s. Like Madeline Kent's *Peninsula*, recently produced at the Soho Rep, the vague geophysical terrain of the title also alludes to the emotional, often turbulent, landscape of the characters.

This play follows a series of watershed moments for its four characters during nine days in 1883: Lotte and Cyrus, puritanical (or Lutheran) Minnesotans; and Dan and Dinah, steamy and passionate Southerners who have wandered their way North. While these characters' internal and external world flows by on stage in a turbulent and sometimes turgid manner, one feels as if one has seen an interesting minor landmark, but remains unmoved.

There are a number of aspects to this production that push me to encourage you to attend this play nonetheless. It is fascinating to watch these skilled actors, deftly directed by Katie Pearl, evolve from broadly drawn caricatures into nuanced, haunted humans. The morally upright Lotte and Cyrus are in need of some extra money to supplement Cyrus' job of building a stone bridge for the mills. To Lotte's dismay, they take in the unruly Dinah and her strong and strapping man, Dan. Initial prejudices break down into friendship and there seems to be a tenuous peace between the couples, until they begin haunting each other's dreams with desire and sexuality. The second act of the play seems to draw better performances from the actors, as they navigate the poetic and magical terrain of their dreams made real.

The language is rich and dense, the work of a clearly imaginative playwright. It is surprising, sexual, and physical. The second act is especially compelling as characters' dreams melt into reality in a kind of Magical Realism, Dinah pulls an Iris flower from her eye and the dam floods and dismantles the house. What is disappointing is that we are still kept at arm's length from the action so that there's no particular empathy for the characters. This does not seem like a conscious choice on the part of the director or writer, though it could be successful in a more stylized production.

It's a wonderful sensory experience to see Rachel Hauck's dynamic wooden set with two beds at different upright angles and a wooden sky. There are small square rock gardens with woodpiles, and at one point the set is flooded with water. The pure elements are presented bare.

Given the difficulty of this script, the performances resonate with commitment and clarity. Kelly McAndrew as Lotte shines in the moments of revelation, adding complexity and a dreaminess to a character who sometimes resembles a wooden board in her flexibility. Barnaby Carpenter as Cyrus is also compelling, simple and generous in his approach.

The Cataract has its moments of delicious clarity, and enjoyable murkiness. Unfortunately, the silt dredged up by a waterfall also creates a kind of opacity that is difficult to navigate: at times, some audience members seemed like they were drowning in the plot. Nevertheless, D'Amour's voice is a vibrant new addition to the American theatre, and Women's Project has assembled an exciting team in this brave production.