



The Cataract

By Mark Blankenship

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About halfway through Lisa D'Amour's "The Cataract," we see a woman pull an iris out of her eye. Not the eyeball iris, mind you, but the flower, long-stemmed and purple. It's a fantasy moment, sure, but the woman's screams as she yanks the plant free sound painfully true. And that's just where "The Cataract" lives, caught between symbolism and reality. By refusing to relinquish either style, it taps the potential of both.

Reality first: Though it bursts with wild images, the play traffics in relatable emotions. Mainly, it's concerned with how often our desire for a safe, structured life can contradict the impulses of our hearts.

D'Amour sketches that battle quickly in her opening scene, as wide-eyed travelers Dinah (Vanessa Aspillaga) and Dan (Tug Coker) arrive at the Minneapolis home of Cyrus (Barnaby Carpenter) and Lottie (Kelly McAndrew). The latter couple is what we might expect from the 19th-century setting, dividing their time between hard work and sleep. It's obvious something will crack when the youngsters arrive with talk of sex and far off places.

But as hoary as that story might sound, "The Cataract" never feels familiar. For one thing, D'Amour is not interested in plot schematics. Almost as soon as she sets up the characters' roles, she starts blurring the lines.

All four face a unique battle between common sense and desire. As desire takes over, D'Amour ups the fantasy with dream sequences, doors in the sky, and the aforementioned flowering eye.

And the creatives know what to do with these magical touches.

Director Katie Pearl's expert pacing brings clarity to even the most hallucinogenic scenes. For instance, Cyrus and Dan spend most of the play damming up a nearby waterfall. When the dam inevitably breaks, Pearl sends three of her actors on a rampage, trying to hold back the symbolic rush of water that floods the sparse, varnished-wood set.

But there on the edge stands Aspillaga, moving with the slow sensuality that makes Dinah such a threat to Minnesota life. She, too, is discovering something unpleasant, but since her revelation comes at a different speed, we can both comprehend it and contrast it to the madness around her. Throughout the show, Pearl uses such fluctuating rhythms to unlock the subtle layers in D'Amour's writing.

Sound designer Daniel Baker particularly complements Pearl's style, creating a sharp commentary on the characters' emotions. A repeated loop of chirping birds might underscore the regimented routine of early scenes, but later problems are met with soft violins. Just like the play, Baker's work begins with light comedy and ends with poignant doubt.

McAndrew leads an excellent cast in proving why doubts makes a stirring conclusion. Initially, Lottie is a parody of repression, hyper-articulating every hard consonant and keeping those forearms locked. But eventually McAndrew lets Lottie awaken with small, beautiful details. A soft smile as she dreams of buying a hat tells us reams about her life.

But at the end, we see Lottie's habits reemerge. A person can't forget old fears just because the sky is opening, and it's devastating to see McAndrew as she hesitates on her new path.

That, too, is what makes "The Cataract" so painfully grand. For all its flights of fancy, it never forgets that living a dream can be very hard work.

More than one option

Set, Rachel Hauk; costumes, Sarah Beers; lighting, Sarah Sidman; sound, Daniel Baker; original music, Broken Chord Collective; dramaturg, Heather Honnold; production stage manager, Leigh Boone. Opened, reviewed April 2, 2006. Running time: 2 HOURS, 10 MIN.