

Beauty in the Beast: "Danny & the Deep Blue Sea," at the Village Theatre through November 30

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Wednesday, 26 November 2008 02:34



Playwright John Patrick Shanley's *Danny & the Deep Blue Sea* is an alternately romantic and volatile two-character drama that finds Roberta, a 31-year-old, jobless mother of a troubled teen, forging a fragile bond with Danny, a 29-year-old truck driver nicknamed "The Beast." And while watching the Curtainbox Theatre Company's current presentation of this 1984 offering, it probably won't take you long to realize that co-stars Kimberly Furness and Eddie Staver III aren't really acting in the production; they're *dancing*.

Shanley's intermission-less play concerns two seemingly hopeless individuals who discover, for a while at least, a measure of hope. But given the emotionally wrenching yet intensely graceful teamwork of its performers, what could've been "merely" a vehicle for two sterling talents - the ultimate black-box-theatre showcase - is instead an expansive and magical piece of theatre; like *Three Viewings*, the equally character-driven one-act that marked the Curtainbox's area debut this past

June, *Danny & the Deep Blue Sea* leaves you with an exhilarating high. As directed by *Three Viewings* helmer Daniel D.P. Sheridan, Furness and Staver partner one another with such gloriously assured and relaxed style that they're like a rough-and-tumble version of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, except you're never quite sure, nor does it much matter, which one is taking the lead.

Munching pretzels in a hole-in-the-wall bar in the Bronx, Furness' Roberta is first seen sitting alone, and before she ever speaks, her weary, slumped-over physicality and empty stare signify "Hands off." Staver's Danny soon enters, plopping down at his own table with a half-filled pitcher of beer, but appears untouchable in a different way; whereas Roberta would likely brush you off, Danny, with his coiled, tense nervousness and darting eyes, would be more apt to punch you out. Yet while there's little surprise in what happens over the next 85 minutes - the pair, as they must, will inevitably break through their walls of resistance and find in each other a kindred spirit - *Danny & the Deep Blue Sea* itself proves to be continually unpredictable.

In the first of the play's three scenes, its characters are both given lengthy monologues that reveal their anguish and self-loathing; Roberta shares an encounter with her father that's as horrific as it is heartbreaking, and Danny tells of a recent, brutal fight in which a man might've died. (At Thursday's performance, upon hearing Staver's tortured reading of "I stomped on his fuckin' chest and I heard something *break*," a woman behind me, for understandable reason, gasped.) Even more shocking than the revelations, though, are the *reactions* to the revelations. Roberta and Danny listen to one another intently - and the sight of Furness and Staver actively listening is about as thrilling as theatre gets - but they don't judge, and they don't coddle; they accept the worst and leave it at that. All throughout *Danny & the Deep Blue Sea*, Roberta and Danny verbally and physically assault one another only to find their attacks met with unexpected kindness and forgiveness, and Furness and Staver are so acutely connected to their haunted figures that their unusual courtship - with both seeking a love they know they don't deserve - grows powerfully affecting.



These are *stunning* performances. Brash and intimidating one moment, bruised and forlorn the next, Furness digs deeply into the character of Roberta and comes out with an almost transcendent acting purity. It's a superbly well-thought-out creation in which you never see the thought behind it, and the actress smartly withholds her dazzling smile until her entire *presence* is smiling; when Danny gets Roberta to grin by repeating her name over and over, Furness' unfettered happiness lights up the room.



And Staver gives such a fantastically forceful, unselfconscious portrayal that you don't watch his work so much as *breathe* it. This Danny is an electrifying presence whether seething with anger or trembling with fear - his aching, impassioned delivery of "*Everything hurts!*" is enough to freeze the blood - and like Furness, Staver is allowed moments when he radiates an almost staggering amount of joy. (Staver is also an exceptional comedian here, and gets perhaps the biggest laugh among the show's many with one giddy exclamation: "Lamps!")

Witnessing this devastating union of talents would be enough for any production. But beyond orchestrating his performers' repartee with true panache, director Sheridan ensures that the show's few technical enhancements match the skill of his cast; the manner in which the bar transforms into Roberta's apartment, with tavern tables morphing into bedroom furniture, is inspiringly clever, and Joseph T. Janz III's sound, with the "big boats" echoing in the distance, is exquisite. (Ditto David

Furness' subtle lighting effects, particularly the illumination coming from the makeshift moon, whose owner, Roberta tells us, "has it on a

timer.") I can think of no higher praise for *Danny & the Deep Blue Sea* than to say that if the talents involved already gave you an inkling as to how good the show might be, the actual results are even *better*.

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