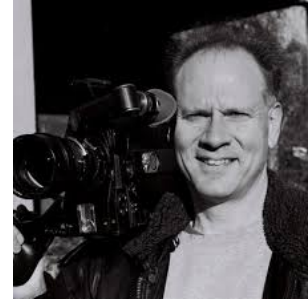


Sheldon Gleisser

Filmmaker, Author, Playwright

October 17, 2017

11:44AM



Saw Evolution Theatre's production of "The Turkey Men" last night.

"The Turkey Men" is an original work by local playwright Douglas Whaley. It's about a young woman, Logan Hendricks (Fia Friend) taken against her will (with her parent's consent!) to an old farmhouse in the middle of nowhere. There, a couple of Christian "de-programmers," Micah and Bethany (Jonathan Putnam and Lori Cannon) attempt to turn her same-sex attraction to sanctified heterosexuality.

But the farmhouse is not entirely uninhabited. Alex and Webster (Ross Shirley and James Harper), two gay men in a very committed relationship, have been there for quite some time. I mean like, since the Civil War. They aren't ghosts, at least not exactly, but they do haunt the place very much, and not in a nice way, at least not for Micah and Bethany.

As Alex and Webster, Ross Shirley and James Harper are as easy and comfortable with each other as a pair of old shoes. They have our sympathies right from the get-go with their wry senses of humor and obvious ease with one another, both amazed at those new-fangled electric lights.

As Logan, Fia Friend is at once sympathetic, as befits someone who spends most of the story tied, chained, and shock collared. She grows more endearing as the story goes on, showing both spunk and vulnerability, the lesbian daughter you wish you had.

It's possible that the most difficult roles go to Jonathan Putnam and Loretta Beth Cannon as the Christian de-programmers. They should be just about completely unsympathetic, but both Putnam and Cannon are able to mine the characters for their rather frightening humanity. What kind of person does what they're doing? Abused children grown up, is playwright Whaley's answer.

Director David Allen Vargo keeps things moving at a brisk pace but gives all of his actors lots of room to breathe. I had a film teacher who once told me "If you want to act, you don't necessarily need to direct, but if you want to direct, you HAVE to do some acting, it doesn't matter if you play the third spear carrier from the left, get out there and get some parts."

I don't know if this is the first play Mr. Vargo has directed, but he has proven my film teacher correct, even while playing much more than the third spear carrier from the left. Vargo's many onstage roles include those in "Chappati," "Sordid Lives," and a memorable turn as Charles

Dickens at Red Herring Theater. All that acting has given him a very sure hand as a director. I hope to see more directing work from him in the future.

Kat Wexler's set design is beautifully and suitably shabby and Michael Bynes' set construction is excellent. Caroline Dittamo's lighting design, and Sue Rapier's sound, both of which include a certain amount of special effects, greatly contributes to the play's cheerful other-worldliness.

It occurred to me while driving home that "The Turkey Men" may be about a child caught in a tug of war between two competing sets of parents, one accepting and the other not. The first and best set harkens back to some truly bad old days for minority rights. Despite this, Alex and Webster have managed, in their way, to both survive and thrive.

The other set of parents is more troubling, because they were born at an arguably better time. Given the right set of circumstances--and a little more toleration both internal and external--Micah and Bethany might have found at least enough happiness to keep from exporting their misery to others.

"The Turkey Men" lies somewhere between "Topper" and the work of the late Larry Shue ("The Foreigner," "The Nerd"). It is playing from October 17-26 at the Columbus Performing Arts Center's Van Fleet Theater. I say saw off that shock collar and check it out!