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Theater review | ‘The Turkey Men:’ Supernatural drama offers enough intrigue and nifty effects to become a hit

By Michael Grossberg For The Columbus Dispatch
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Two blithe spirits come to endearing life in “The Turkey Men,” a clever new haunted-house tale informed and inspired by gay history and American progress.

Evolution Theatre Company is ending its 2019 season on a felicitous and ingenious note with the well-cast, well-paced world premiere, which opened Friday at the Columbus Performing Arts Center.

Columbus playwright Douglas Whaley blends supernatural drama, romance, tragedy and even bits of comedy, music and science fiction in his entertaining play.

A lot of exposition is required to set up the scenario, but Whaley and director David Allen Vargo weave it in pretty well amid engaging characterizations that help make the explanations more plausible.

One can’t easily summarize the somewhat contrived premise of the plot, nor should later twists be revealed without undermining the nominal amount of suspense in what’s ultimately a predictable morality play within a more-satisfying romantic drama.

Suffice to say that the story, set in 2016 in the dilapidated farmhouse of an abandoned turkey farm, revolves around two ex-soldiers from the Civil War era, now largely ghosts who face a difficult decision when three unexpected visitors arrive: a frightened lesbian teenager and an older man and woman who seemingly have kidnapped her but actually have taken her at the request of her concerned parents.

The turkey men, still reveling in what must be the longest sustained gay relationship imaginable, want to help the girl after witnessing her treatment by the religious fundamentalists, who seem hell-bent to “pray away the gay.”

Vargo’s strong direction bolstered fine performances by the five-member cast at Wednesday’s preview.

Yet, two performances are pivotal in defining the emotional core of the story: the admirable relationship between Webster Randolph Carter III, a Tennessee country boy whipped to near-death as an adolescent by his father when discovered with another guy; and Alexander Small, Northerner who met Web when he became a military prisoner during the Civil War.

James Harper brings an old-fashioned masculinity alloyed with tenderness and a stoic code of reserve to Web, while Ross Shirley adds courtly charm, good humor and intuition to empathetic Alexander.

Together, Harper and Shirley forge a rich chemistry and intimacy that beautifully evoke their characters’ storied history.

The actors ground their roles further in a bygone era by speaking in rich regional accents with faintly anachronistic rhythms that implicitly unite their shared sensibilities as 19th-century gentlemen of honor.

Fia Friend is convincingly contemporary as questioning teenager Logan Hendricks, betrayed by her parents but confident of her newfound sexuality. As the poor abused Cinderella to the gay couple’s veritable fairy godfathers, Friend projects the requisite distress and hesitancy without veering into melodrama.

The two trickiest roles are underwritten, but veteran central Ohio actors Lori Cannon and Jonathan Putnam deepen what might in lesser hands come across as one-dimensional villainy. As devout but misguided Christians Bethany and Micah, Cannon and Putnam gradually expose psyches damaged by a painful history of repression and abuse.

Ironically, and part of Whaley’s editorial theme, the 170-year-old couple turn out to be far more modern and enlightened than the 2016 couple, who might have been more plausible if placed within the 1950s.

Regarding the more ghostly manifestations and revelations of this nifty production, perhaps it’s better to adopt a policy of “don’t ask, don’t tell.”

Yet, with its supernatural aspects brought out effectively by Caroline Dittamo’s shifting lighting and Vargo’s sound design on Kat Wexler’s antique haunted-house set, this deft production seems ripe with potential to become a Halloween-season hit.

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