

The Children: Purpose Unfound When Disaster Floods

In the shabby, eerie space of an English coastal cottage populated by three retired scientists, jealousy, liaison, and bittersweet romance interweaves with a web of secrets. Calling for soul-searching questions which chillingly echoes this peculiar time we find ourselves in, Lucy Kirkwood delineates an interpersonal journey reclaiming responsibility for a threatened world upon the backdrop of a nuclear disaster. While divinely designed and acted by an inimitable force of artists, SpeakEasy's production left a provocative mission of the story unfulfilled.

At the center of a dark and frigid kitchen stands Rose (Karen MacDonald) with a nosebleed, trying to control the flow of blood staining her shirt. Her old-time comrade, Hazel (Paula Plum), panics in the face of such a medical situation caused by Rose's uninvited arrival. With an accent that comes and goes, Rose's heady stories of living in America sprinkle in comedic relief when the two women find themselves in a well of microaggressions towards each other until Robin (Tyrees Allen) sweeps the stage with his lustful charisma. After an absence of 38 years, Rose's planned reunion totes the baggage from their past relationships and harbors a mission--she has come to recruit Robin and Hazel to restore the nuclear mess their shortsighted engineering has created.

Furniture, artifacts, and a children's tricycle retrieved from their demolished home crowded the playground for the three eclectic actors(set design by Cristina Todesco). Yet, they filled the space with intricate acting upon the nuances of their complicated history. Plum's Hazel finds power in routine movements, intriguing to watch even when scrubbing a salad. MacDonald's Rose manages to go above and beyond different tones of her personality, embodying both free-spiritedness and quirkiness; Robin's loving presence effortlessly catalyzes the chemistry between this old married couple.

While they manage to balance the contrasting tones in Kirkwood's taut one-act, they noticeably sand the sharp edges of these characters. Each of them, dogmatic and beholden to none in their own way, toss out idiosyncratic remarks on their everyday apocalyptic existence with a southern grandma-like ranty energy, tickling the audiences with relatable laughs. It seems that the stars of our scenes either struggle or have no intention to incorporate the whimsical metaphors populating Kirkwood's work, and it may not compliment Kirkwood's intention when evocative statements win the spectators as merely comedic.

The set design of a decaying oceanfront cottage near the exclusion zone is nuanced yet straightforward—potted plants and colorful pans added to the bare concrete wall of a kitchenette is a peek into Hazel's well-balanced lifestyle. Dark, gloomy, gray-ish themed lighting design conveys glimpses of the disastrous outside world by isolating the cottage and immersing the wings in a void, chillingly effective yet sacrificing some of the detailed stage pictures in prolonged low lights.

As the couple makes up their mind, calling their children with heart-rending voices, the final scene overflows in literal water, slowly letting go of betrayal and guilt: Hazel and Rose moving and breathing together in a ghostly light, Robin staring out at the darkness into the unforeseen future. Yet it too leaves many emotions free-flowing when the evening concludes

with more discerning questions unresolved—what frees us from the fears of deteriorating when young generations can't save us?

An apocalyptic story with worrisome elements—out of water, electricity, and a flooding toilet—introduces pressing urgency to a confined room of the three. Yet, in this version, everything alludes to individuality and romantic affairs. Hazel's obsession over self-care and Rose's messed up life awaits the more in-depth exploration of its significance on personal growth, while now it comes across as a showcase of two opposite types of women. The love triangle wouldn't casually arise if they didn't spend their life fighting together at a nuclear plant; neither was it just a moment of youth everybody once had in their life. The staged version failed to connect these drips of information to the greater theme, which Kirkwood masterfully laid out around the plot.

With the title of the play giving away its vital theme, one might struggle to imagine the fate of "the children", wondering the real children implied in the title: the new generation who are inheriting a damaged world of their parents, whose irresponsibility left unpunished acting like children? Love stories and panics for aging may be set aside, but indispensable questions left unexplored. Rooted in a fictional setting in the UK while drawing inspirations from the Fukushima tsunami nuclear leak, the story presents nuance and ambiguity not in the mere solutions but the attitudes driving decisions forth. And it was clearly on the page for us—Kirkwood's quirky writing places us in a shivering reality suggesting the smallness of life and the extremity of the world, informing us that in order to grow, one must think beyond yoga, salad, and an obsession for eternal life. SpeakEasy's *The Children* can be found lacking this connection, leaving an open ground.

The Children, by Lucy Kirkwood. Directed by Bryn Boice. Staged by SpeakEasy Stage Company, Boston Center for the Arts, Calderwood Pavilion, 539 Tremont St., Boston, MA.