

Review: ALICE IN BLACK AND WHITE

Reviewed by Brian Walker

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Looking for Lilith Theatre Company takes a departure from producing ensemble devised work, with lovely results, in their current production of Robin Rice Lichtig's play *Alice in Black and White*.

Alice Austen was a photographer and socialite who lived on Staten Island from 1866 through the 1940's in her family's home, Clear Comfort Farm. She fell in love with Gertrude Tate of Queens and the two women shared much of their lives together. All of this in a time where a woman's place was thought to be at the home with her husband and children, not taking photographs and certainly not having an intimate relationship with another woman. Alice was a dreamer, she thought about life on a different frequency than those around her and she never knew the impact her photography and her story would have until the very end of her life. *Alice in Black and White* is a biographical play about her life, her art, her love and ultimately her demise.

Robin Rice Lichtig's script is sentimental without being mushy, lovely without being contrived, funny at times, heartbreaking at others. It focuses on the connection between time past and time present and how we're all connected in some way, no matter the distance of space or time. In addition, it explores the nature of art and what it means to create it, to share it and to become defined by it.

The first act of the script felt more connected to a forward moving story with drive and exciting motion to it; the scenes were engaging and interesting and built onto one another as they progressed and as we meet Alice, see her discover her passion for photography and meet the love of her life, Gertrude. The second act focuses mostly on Alice's decline and it's a tough journey to take. The scenes felt choppy, with less meat and more broad strokes than the intimate details we get in Act I. That being said, the final scene of the play is quite breathtaking and I found myself choking back tears as past and future converged in the present and ultimately Alice is left with the knowledge that her art will survive after she is gone.

The ensemble of actors (for the first time in Lilith's history featuring not one but TWO male actors) did an expert job with the material and I enjoyed them all immensely.

Jennifer Thalman Kepler as Alice makes the most dramatic transformation from a ten year old little girl to an elderly woman of eighty five. Her transition from stage to stage of Alice's life felt seamless and natural, as if she was aging before our very eyes. She is wonderful throughout, but the ending was sublime. She gives a look and has a moment before the lights fade that says so much: celebrating Alice's life while at the same time accepting her demise. It gave

me goose bumps and it was awesome theatre.

Another moment of awesome theatre starred Dawn Schulz as Violet. Alice confides in her friend Violet about her relationship with Gertrude and Violet ultimately admits to hating her life; being married with children. Ms. Schulz's subtle and controlled performance was gut-wrenching and beautiful. Exquisite is the word that kept popping into my head after it was over. My favorite scene of the play; it pulled me in and didn't let me go.

Ted Lesley gave a quiet and underplayed performance which worked very well with his roles, especially the family patriarch intent on seeing his blood line continue. He loves his granddaughter Alice and for much of the play their relationship is supportive and sweet, but in the moment when he realizes she's never going to have a child, the disappointment was palpable and well played.

Laura Ellis also did an impressive job morphing ages from sexy ingénue to caretaker to an old blind woman still intent on taking care of her love. The moment she leaves Alice in a home to stay on her sister's couch was almost too heartbreaking to watch and she felt it with all of her being.

Joe Hatfield does a delightful job as Oliver Jensen, a book publisher from the "present" obsessed with finding Alice's photo negatives in the basement of The Historical Society. For me this character and the parallel to Alice and their connection over time (I don't want to give too much away here) was really nicely done but the role of Oliver Jensen was a little under-developed as far as what's given to the audience in the script. Joe does a great job at elevating the character's quirks and connection to Alice and succeeded in making an easily sidelined role engaging and endearing and a ton of fun to watch.

Founding members and Looking for Lilith mainstays Shannon Woolley Allison and Trina Fisher were both as expected: wonderful. Shannon gets to play two distinctly different roles: as Alice's mother she's sophisticated, cold and bristly and as a drunk street person she's seedy and creepy and it was fun seeing her play them both so effortlessly. Trina plays the Historical Society receptionist in the "present day" and Oliver Jensen's obstacle for getting Alice's negatives with wit and oodles of charm and character. Though, again, I felt the role is a little under-developed in the script, she manages an adorable side story to Alice's main arc and she had me rooting for her right up to the very end.

The stage is decorated on all sides with reproductions of Alice's photographs in various sizes, with a large screen which changed images throughout the production and the result was quite lovely and arresting. Watching Alice's story come to life while seeing the photographs really gave the feeling of being there and seeing things the way they looked to Alice over a hundred years ago. Sound design by Nathan Roberts was also especially impactful and beautifully underscored moments, provided sound effects and served as another wonderful connection to Alice's world.

Alice in Black and White is a beautiful script which is lucky to have its world premiere with this intimate production by Looking for Lilith. Kathi E. B. Ellis does a wonderful job at telling the story through the lens of movement and storytelling that's become synonymous with a Lilith devised piece, still remaining true to the tone and purpose of Robin Rice Lichtig's play. It's a match made in heaven and a thought-provoking and moving night of theatre.

Alice in Black and White
by Robin Rice Lichtig
Directed by Kathi E.B. Ellis

Presented by Looking for Lilith Theatre Company
Information: (502) 638-2559 or www.lookingforlilith.org

Remaining Performances: March 4, 7-9 at 7:30pm, and March 9 at 2pm
All performances take place at the Martin Experimental Theatre at The Kentucky Center
501 West Main Street
Louisville KY 40202

Reservations:
(502) 584-7777 or 1-800-775-7777
www.kentuckycenter.org
\$18 general admission, \$15 for students and seniors

Featuring: Shannon Woolley Allison, Laura Ellis, Trina Fischer, Joe Hatfield, Jennifer Thalman Kepler, Ted Lesley, and Dawn Schulz