

The History of Stuff

by Mitch Montgomery

Artifacts of Consequence reviewed April 21, 2009

Recent interest in the environmental crisis has spawned a new sort of genre in speculative fiction – the exploration of mankind’s long-term impact on the planet; most notably the tendency to leave our junk all over the place. Thanks to Pixar’s hypnotic masterpiece Wall-E, it is trendy to sift through future fossil records of refuse in search of meaning and, perhaps, a precise flash point where our wasteful race went wrong. In Wall-E, landfills of useless items choked out humanity’s progress, but in Ashlin Halfnight’s contemplative new play, *Artifacts of Consequence*, our leftover stuff takes on a deeper meaning after civilization has fallen.

At some unspecified point in the future, contemporary society has collapsed; leaving Ari, Minna and Dallas in an underwater repopulation facility, where they catalogue found items and tend to the other sedated citizens. We are never told exactly what ended the world in *Artifacts* – Cholera? Flooding? – but soon enough we become aware that food replacement pills from “The Department” are running short and internal tensions are running high. The arrival of a wanderer named Theo seems to brighten up sprightly Ari’s mood, but before long the pressure of maintaining the facility becomes too great for Minna.

Halfnight and the immensely capable director Kristjan Thor’s great conceit here is the strict ritual of archiving things like sneakers, literature, and Twizzlers. An invisible garage door opens along the apron of the stage and the characters present the audience with each knick-knack for evaluation. In cases of literature and plays, a troupe of groggy-eyed actors is awakened from sedation to read the words aloud. You see, Dallas (Jayd McCarty) was once a curator at the Smithsonian and he has trouble admitting that the food needed to save the human race is more important than the great literary achievements of history.

Halfnight and Thor present the small human moments just right – while singing “Oh, What a Beautiful Morning” from *Oklahoma*, a usually sedated actor (Tobias Burns) suddenly swaggers charismatically, caught up in the music; or allowing each character to savor a stick of chewing gum for the first time in years; or Theo’s (Marty Keiser) nostalgic smile as he cradles a Chewbacca action figure and delivers the line, “Laugh it up fuzz ball.” Yes, Halfnight and Thor often remind us, these are just things, but they are also adept signposts for our memories and, in dire straights, able surrogates for happier days.

The mood is almost spoiled towards the end, as the circumstances become more dismal and the “garage door” is left open. From there on, the characters frequently address the audience about their mental states or predicaments, which feels overly meta at best and like a cheat at worst. Eventually, Ari even remarks that she expected a better ending. Breaking the fourth wall is a proud theatrical tradition and, to be sure, an example of the practice is all but cited here in the evaluation of a passage from *Our Town*. But this sort of on-the-nose commentary seems tonally at odds with the subtle and specific world that Halfnight and Thor – not to mention the exemplary design team of Jennifer de Fouchier, Kathleen Dobbins, and Mark Valadez – worked so hard to craft.

Beyond that, there are some superbly honest flashes towards the end of *Artifacts*, such as an all-too-truthful decision from Theo and a uniquely stunning ending beat. Overall, Thor’s comprehensive staging reinforces Halfnight’s wistful anthology of brick-a-brack and sentiment with unparalleled style. Sara Buffamanti imparts much heart to the piece in her role of Ari, the 80’s movie obsessed innocent coming of age in world much darker than *Dirty Dancing* suggested. Her romance with Keiser’s genial Theo lends the piece relief it would sorely miss otherwise.

McCarty and Rebecca Lingafelter (as Minna) are interesting parental figures for the other characters, and their bracing chemistry suggests that each possesses a rich past. While Lingafelter is at her neurotic best in Minna’s more obsessive-compulsive moments, she tackles her character’s eventual breakdown very respectably. And again, Tobias Burns, Hanna Cheek and Amy Newhall make great numb actors in their short scenes.

Through anthropology and atmosphere, *Artifacts of Consequence* searches for significance in the scraps of society and, more often than not, this formidable work finds it.



Jayd McCarty and Sara Buffamanti in *Artifacts of Consequence*
Photo Credit: Jeff Clarke



Rebecca Lingafelter, Jayd McCarty and Sara Buffamanti in *Artifacts of Consequence*
Photo Credit: Jeff Clarke



Sara Buffamanti and Marty Keiser in *Artifacts of Consequence*
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