



Wednesday, April 22, 2009
Artifacts of Consequence



Photo/Jeff Clarke

In the tradition of great plays, there are at least two ways to experience Ashlin Halfnight's terrific and wholly original *Artifacts of Consequence*. And director Kristjan Thor (as he did with Electric Pear's *The Sexual Neuroses of Our Parents*) invests so much in the circumstances of both experiences--a romantic thriller--that we're constantly affected on multiple levels. Literally so, in fact: the play begins as the audience files in through the side door, becoming this world's privileged "evaluators."

In the first interpretation, "consequence" means importance, and refers to the clash between the romantic notions of Dallas (Jayd McCarty), a preservationist, and the realism of Minna (Rebecca Lingafelter), a survivalist. For Dallas, life isn't worth living without saving the beauty of the outside world--forget the practicality of Converse sneakers: he craves the magic of fiction, like *The Crucible*--whereas Minna, who maintains the labyrinthine archives of their post-disaster shelter, understands all too well the self-indulgent sacrifices of art. After all, without food (actually, FRPs: food replacement pills), there is no room for beauty.

This is the more chilling second interpretation: Dallas and Minna are the resulting artifacts (i.e., "of consequence") of the world's climactic decline. Despite clinging to routine in their shelter (shown by repeated dialogue), the water levels are still rising, contagions run rampant, and their girl Ari (Sara Buffamanti) will never be permitted to see the "above." Instead, she quotes from movies like *Pretty Woman* and learns from old issues of *Glamour*. Things grow more complicated in her small world when a stranger, Theo (Marty Keiser), arrives, giving her an outlet for her newfound sexuality.

Although Jennifer de Fouchier's industrial set makes it look utterly plausible, *Artifacts of Consequence* is actually a high concept play, and it's Halfnight's dialogue that sells it. Things not only make sense, but do so in surprising, revealing ways: Minna is protective of Ari, but shows it by giving Ari a copy of *Deliverance* to watch. Ari, who has had little experience with love, pulls moves from *Dirty Dancing* but also comes up with original nuggets of her own: "You make me want to go bake a meat pie with my heart!" Theo is attracted to Ari, and so he flirts back on her level (a stomach's gurgling has never been so poignant), and yet, fearful of being expelled from this poor-man's Eden, holds himself back. As for Dallas, he's practically beatific when talking about the first edition of *Catcher in the Rye*, but totally grounded when it comes to strangers.

It's so smooth that it takes us a moment to be taken aback when the actors start to address us, or come into our section to fix a leak. Sweetness is used as a weapon (you'll never look at a Twinkie the same way). Even a trio of blindfolded actors (Tobias Burns, Hanna Cheek, and Amy Newhall) being brought on stage to enact and help evaluate some of the more ethereal artifacts cause only the slightest of eye-flutters. By the time you understand how all of this is changing the way we actually perceive and evaluate the world--for instance, a gentle rendition of *Oklahoma's* "Oh What A Beautiful Morning"--those flutters may have turned to unabashed tears.

It should go without saying that such originality avoids stereotypes, but it's worth repeating, especially for the cast's sake. Without McCarty's bright idealism, Buffamanti's fierce naivety, Keiser's nervy nervousness, or--especially--Lingafelter's desperate strength, the play might be dismissed as clever propaganda. Instead, it has put the "art" in artifacts and removed the "con" from consequence: *Artifacts of Consequence* is an important play that's a joy to watch.