

The Verge



The Ontological-Hysteric Incubator and Performance Lab 115 at St. Mark's Church

Reviewed by Leonard Jacobs
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PHOTO CREDIT
Sue Kessler

Theater historian Arthur Hobson Quinn once called "The Verge" by Susan Glaspell "a study of a neurotic woman who is going insane." If you've only got a few pages in which to cover Glaspell—one of the 20th century's major theater writers and a leader among women dramatists of any era—that's as good, if reductive, a characterization as any other. By condensing "The Verge" into one 75-minute act from the original three, director Alice Reagan fortunately proves that Glaspell's most peculiar, elusive, moody work is also one of her most insistently complex.

Claire (Rebecca Lingafelter), the neurotic at hand, is obsessed with creating a new form of plant; she calls it Breath of Life. Her grumpy, scolding husband, Harry (B. Brian Argotsinger), chooses to breakfast in the greenhouse, as all of the heat of their home is pumped there to keep the greenery warm. Houseguests Richard (Tuomas Hiltunen), called Dick, and Tom (Todd d'Amour) arrive; their dynamics with Claire—brotherly and romantic, respectively—are quickly made clear. Reagan wisely telescopes the roles of Claire's assistant and maid into arch Antoinette (Sara Buffamanti).

Jennifer de Fouchier's set is a long diagonal runway of playing space flanked by mounds of fresh earth you can smell from your seat. It suffices wonderfully (though noxiously) as a greenhouse.

From its first mounting in 1921 at the now-demolished Provincetown Playhouse, "The Verge" was known for heavy symbolism and expressionism. For this production, Reagan has asked the actors to infuse their acting with the same spirit. Lingafelter's Victorian bearing fascinates. Her character's disintegration, climaxing in the committing of murder and singing of "Nearer, My God, to Thee," strikes at the heart of Glaspell's liberated-feminist themes.

Indeed, Argotsinger's Harry, looking whimsical in Stacey Berman's spot-on costume, is a symbol of the American male's long-ago unwillingness to fathom why women might need more in their lives than to keep house and raise children. No wonder Claire is bewitched by the amorous Tom, or why the kid-brother caricature Dick drives her over the edge. Aside from Antoinette, the women in Claire's life are of no use: Daughter Elizabeth (Rachel Jablin) is needy; sister Adelaide (Birgit Huppuch, in a video by Jeff Clarke) is judgmental and cold.

As for the plant, naturally Glaspell has Claire turn out to be successful. It blossoms—unlike poor Claire herself.