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REVIEWS



A scene from 'Only the Moon Howls' by Dean Farell Bruggeman at Theatre Unleashed (photo by Alicia Reys)



Only The Moon Howls

Reviewed by Pauline Adamek

Theatre Unleashed

Through March 12

RECOMMENDED

A couple meet, fall in love and marry. But do Whitney and Jake live happily together forever and ever thereafter? Not in Dean Farrell Bruggeman's heart-wrenching drama they don't.

Bruggeman's examination of a love affair, a marriage and a tragedy is beautifully handled, and incorporates diverse theatrical devices and elements of magical realism. A quartet of supernatural guides comments frequently and with sarcasm on the action, occasionally traversing the barrier between everyday life and the spirit world by conversing with one of the two central characters. Five performers— Margaret Glaccum, Sammi Lappin, Madeleine Miller, Graydon Schlichter and Eric Stachura — share these four roles; each also plays miscellaneous roles throughout, mainly popping up as friends of Whitney and Jake.

Director Eric Cire has double-cast this emotionally powerful show. Whitney (Julia Plostnieks, alternately played by Kate Dyer) is an opinionated and assertive career woman — a self-motivated 'go-getter' who knows what she wants and isn't afraid to clearly state her demands. Jake (Carey Matthews, alternately played by Michael Lutheran) is a more introverted soul. A shy guy who aspires to write 'the next great American novel,' he becomes transfixed by the lovely Whitney when he spies her alone in a cafe.

Whitney slyly observes his interest, and loses no time in putting him through his paces to see if he's worth her time. Poor Jake can only awkwardly stutter in response to her spiky conversational challenges. He's clearly out of his depth and out of her league. "I'm completely normal!" he insists; "You're bossy," he dares to assert. Eventually Whitney realizes that Jake just might deserve her attention, and a romance ensues.

As we watch important moments in their united lives unfold, the guides often interject, exhorting Whitney that time is running out. The ominous and terrifying sound of car tires screeching to a halt leaves us no doubt as to the tragedy that lies ahead, and therein lies some of the genius of

Bruggeman's unique play.

Whitney is undergoing a painful review of her married life and we are the witnesses. She also does battle with her guides, vociferously disputing their enhanced version of events. "We're telling the emotional truth," her main female guide (Margaret Glaccum) insists, adding, "These are the approved anecdotes." Jake also defends the guide's version, gently telling Whitney that "She's just helping us tell our story."

As Whitney, Julia Plostnieks gives a wonderful and complex performance, charting her character's emotional rollercoaster ride with credible sincerity. She brings a crisp and edgy vitality to her role that hooks us into her poignant journey. Carey Matthews is adorable as the sweet and shy Jake: gentle, endearing and warm and devoid of any personality faults.

A highlight of *Only the Moon Howls* is the pivotal scene where Jake converses with a friend over beer while watching a game on TV. It's only here, as the pair discusses kids and fatherhood, that we gain insight into Jake's unrealized dreams. It's heartbreaking to watch him express his profound regrets, admitting, "Something slipped away because we let it..."

The only glaring flaw in Bruggeman's otherwise appealing drama is that the story begins and ends with Jake; Whitney has no life (at least on stage) before or after him. It's a colossal shame that such a fascinating and dynamic character as Whitney only exists within the male gaze, both on stage and off.

***Theatre Unleashed – The Belfrey Stage Upstairs at the Crown, 11031 Camarillo St., NoHo.
Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Mon. Feb. 27 and March 7.; through Mar. 12. (818) 849-4039 or
www.theatreunleashed.org; Running time: 80 minutes with no intermission.***

