

Identities on a Spectrum: “Winter People”



Lyndsay Allyn Cox and Kayla Lian in *Winter People*. (Photo: Kalman Zabarsky)

Presented by Boston Playwrights' Theatre
By Laura Neill
Directed by Avital Shira
Fight choreography by Jessica Scout Malone
Dramaturgy by Cayenne Douglass and Jordyn Stoessel

December 6-16, 2018

Critique by Kitty Drexel

December 10, 2018 (Boston, MA) *Winter People* and playwright Laura Neill aren't taking any of your establishment bullshit. This play challenges how we view play production. It takes great risk with even greater success. It is well written and should be viewed by as many developing and established artists as possible. It breaks rules and shows us why these traditional rules are should be broken.

A mcmansion is burning down in the Hamptons and the winter residents are letting it burn. Lynn (Lyndsay Allyn Cox) has a library to run and a daughter to raise. Jason (Jaime Carrillo) is

preventing Raul's (Mariana Mondragon) deportation. Luke (Conrad Sundqvist-Olmos) and Shaun (Kayla Lian) are searching for a pregnant, runaway teen. Life would be simpler if they could do these things. They don't want to watch the world burn, but they will if it means preventing their lives from combusting.

Winter People is about identity and the politics humans create around identity. To trouble the waters, Neill's script requests five actors play 14 characters of alternating gender and age identities. Male presenting actors play female presenting characters and vice versa. Director Avital Shira and the cast approach this conundrum with respect.

Even when the characters are less than sympathetic, the actors punch up. Carrillo plays a father and daughter with such emotional maturity that we forget that society's proclivity for toxic masculinity. Conversely, Lian's portrayal of a man caught between expectations and his love for his best friends reminds us of what we lose when we let bigotry win.

Each actor has their teaching moment. The most topical of these was Cox's portrayal of Lynn. Lynn judges harshly a [family of illegal immigrants](#) when compassion would have been easy. Immigrants are people. Unless one is a native, our ancestors came to the US looking for freedom, work, peace, happiness, etc. *Everyone* should be given the opportunity to live here if they come to our borders seeking the same.

It is so refreshing to see theatre-makers in an audience to support other theatre-makers. To those of you who attend theatre with regularity: thank you. You are seen and appreciated.

What is so wonderful about this play (aside from its cleverly subversive casting and fine writing) is its inclusion of negative reactions from the financially stable, white, and hetero to Otherness in real time. We, an audience of averages, are forced to endure symbolic representations of our fragile normative-selves behaving badly in moments of stress. [Neill holds up a mirror to the audience. Our reflection is not pretty.](#)

Human natures tells us to identify with Neill's sympathetic othered characters but we shouldn't. We aren't them; they aren't us. Neill asks us to love them anyway. To accept those who are different from us is the right thing to do. It's a litmus test for human decency that not every audience member will pass. That may make some viewers uncomfortable without understanding why. Discomfort can be healthy.

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