



Fear in Having ‘Gone Nowhere’ at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre

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Marc Pierre and Sam Warton in ‘Gone Nowhere’ at Boston Playwrights’ Theatre

by James Wilkinson

‘Gone Nowhere’ – Written by Daniel C. Blanda. Directed by Noah Putterman. Scenic Design: Adam Hawkins. Lighting Design: Kevin Dunn. Sound Design: Nicholas Y. Chen. Costume

Design: Sandra Zhihan Jia. Presented by Boston Playwrights' Theatre, 949 Commonwealth Ave. Boston through November 14

Boston Playwrights' Theatre's *Gone Nowhere* passes through the mind so quickly that you're going to have to remind yourself it was ever there. Even now I'm having difficulty conjuring up scenes to write about. It's a whisp of an experience made all the more disappointing because, I actually went into the production with high hopes. We're in the middle of a strange time in Boston theater where everything being offered to audiences is trapped in the death grip of respectability. Come on in and feel better. Let us remind you how important theatre is. Cynical as it may sound, I don't say that as a knock against quality; some of the recent shows post-pandemic have been quite good. But being stranded in a sea of noble intentions does make you long for something that breaks the mold a bit and indulges in some trashy fun for its own sake. *Gone Nowhere*, with its promises of eerie atmosphere and pulpier material seemed poised to liven things up. Is it unfair for me to expect the play to be something that it isn't? Perhaps. But then you fall into the frustrating puzzle of trying to figure out just what the play's intentions really are.

Daniel C. Blanda's play sets up a homecoming for two childhood friends right in the middle of America's heartland. Hunter (Sam Warton) is the good ol' boy who stayed in his hometown, living on a farm with his pick-up and his dog some thirty miles from the nearest city. Reilly (Marc Pierre) is the one who got out and moved to New York City. Now he's come back as an outsider with his pressed formal clothing making a marked contrast with Hunter's flannel and trucker hat. Are there dark secrets in the shared past of these two which will come out over the course of the evening? Of course there are, (why would we even bother to have friends if not to share awkward moments of silence while we ponder the unspeakable things in our past?). It's a familiar set up, but the extra ingredient Blanda throws into the mix, (the one that gave me hope for a little life), is an unseen monster lurking in the cornfields surrounding Hunter's farm, one we hear devouring a farm animal in the play's first moments. Is it an intruder? A bear? Perhaps something a bit more Lovecraftian in nature?

We're meant to contemplate that looming threat in the background of the play's action, (and ultimately, it's a metaphor for the thing in these two characters' history that threatens to destroy them), but there's not much chance for contemplation with director Noah Putterman cranking up the play's supposed spookiness every chance he gets. There's a great environment here provided by scenic designer Adam Hawkins. An off-kilter farmhouse with a single naked lightbulb hanging from rafters. The wide, grey-stained planks of the building are set adrift in a sea of black sand while the edges of the cornfield can be seen in the distance. It's an unnerving location perfectly calibrated to a quiet tone of creeping dread but Putterman keeps slamming his foot on the gas pedal in a way that feels jarring. Scene transitions blast us with light and sound in a manner clearly meant to reflect a character's pressure cooker state of mind and create a sense of impending danger. But the play doesn't give us enough context for what that state of mind might be or where its coming from, so the moments don't read as anything other than confusing noise. Other moments within the text itself get underscored in a way that sacrifices subtlety. It creates a cramped viewing experience. You don't feel as though you're being lead anywhere or allowed to explore. Rather, you're punted down the narrative line.



In the eye of this hurricane, we should have the characters to cling to and the two actors do manage to find complimentary tones. Warton plays Hunter as great big bear of a guy, never without a beer in hand and with a full-throated voice that wavers between friendly and threatening. Pierre as Reilly gets into the stilted energy of someone who doesn't fit into the environment and feels lost. They're both types, but the problem is that they don't exist as anything else. For a play that's so dependent on the history of the characters, the history of the characters doesn't seem to be informing their choices. In theory, these two grew up together and in this environment. And yet when Hunter pulls out a gun, Reilly freaks out like he's in the room with an AK-47 when in fact, it's a simple hunting rifle. As someone from a rural environment wouldn't he have grown up, if not with weapons, at least around them? So why the freak-out? Does living in New York City for a few years really wipe away your history that fully? And wouldn't that be more terrifying than what's lurking in the corn?

As for the larger mystery, the dark thing in Hunter and Reilly's past, I'm in no danger of spoiling it because I'm still not totally sure what it is, (much the way we're never sure what the monster is either). I have some sense of a few broad strokes, but the specifics of exactly what happened, who's angry at who and why get lost in a sea of oblique references that are parsed throughout the play. Here, I sympathize with Blanda. He's trying to avoid starting the play off with an exposition dump to situate us with what's happening. But surely there should be some better way to thread the needle. Eventually the characters start to address it more directly, but by that point the history feels tacked on to the characters rather than one that's been lived with. With no real weight, the basic premise of the play starts to melt away. Why exactly did these two come together when appear to have had no real connection for ages? The only possible answer is that the play wouldn't happen if they didn't.



When the end comes, it arrives like a whisper with one character forced to look out into the black sea of the night sky. For all of the miles he's traveled, he's confronted with the fact that he's

stranded, having gone nowhere. The unfortunate part is that so have we. *For tickets and more information visit their website: www.bostonplaywrights.org*

Potential patrons should note that they will be expected to show a COVID vaccination card or negative COVID test in order to enter the theater. Masks will be required by the audience throughout the show. For more information on these policies, visit their website.

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