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Theater review: ‘Detroit’ a searing dark comedy

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By Wendell Brock - For the AJC

The backyard barbecue is one of those American traditions that is cloaked in smoke rings of nostalgia and innocence. But in Lisa D’Amour’s “Detroit,” the leisurely activity of the suburban class turns into something that is black and disturbing. It’s a trip to hell, with a burger and a beer on the side.

When the seemingly hospitable Mary and Ben invite the new kids from next door over for steaks, things seem normal enough. But little by little, like wisps of gray smoke rising from charcoal, the air becomes filled with an acrid toxicity.

We learn that Ben has been laid off from his job as a loan officer at a bank. We start to detect a creeping sense of fear and panic in Mary’s politely cheery hostess banter. And after it’s revealed that Sharon and Kenny, the younger couple from next door, are recovering drug addicts living on the edge of poverty, the play’s emotional tenor slowly goes from smoke-alarm level to firetrucks and sirens.

Directed by Lisa Adler at Horizon Theatre, D’Amour’s 2011 Pulitzer Prize finalist is a terrific night of theater — as funny as it is scathing. And while it can be seen as a caustic commentary with plenty to say about economic dysfunction and urban blight, it should be pointed out that Detroit is more a state of mind than an actual setting. I’m less excited about the politics of the play than the virtuoso writing — the way D’Amour calibrates the story as a series of subtle but ominous revelations, which eventually erupt into full-out conflagration.

Adler has put together a top-notch cast: Carolyn Cook as Mary, who tries so hard to conceal her messy emotional state and rattled nerves; Mark Cabus as Ben, a kind of burger-flipping Walter Mitty, sunny and upbeat yet sneaky somehow; Kylie Brown as Sharon, who seems to be on a path of recovery but occasionally spirals off into dangerous corners; and Adam Fristoe, as the snarky but somehow likable Kenny. Tom Thon makes a last-minute arrival here as Frank, a character who serves to fill in some of Sharon and Kenny’s backstory but alas feels rather tacked-on.

Some of the best material here, for me at least, involves Mary’s confusion about matters of technology and other things; Sharon’s dreams; and the suggestion that Ben is a closet Brit. Though some of the acting at the Saturday night performance I saw felt slightly tentative at first, it quickly snapped into shape. Cook brings a wonderfully off-kilter sensibility to Mary. Cabus is deliciously expressive — often without saying anything. Fristoe brings a bit of masculine edginess to the material and a raucous physical vocabulary that seems to infect and inspire the cast; it’s his finest work to date. As Sharon, Brown is quite convincing as a former druggie who occasionally lapses into babbling flights of hysteria.

Nyrobi Moss contributes scant, cookout-appropriate costumes, and Moriah and Isabel A. Curley-Clay deliver amazingly detailed sets that serve the story well. Mary and Ben’s patio is slightly more presentable than Kenny

and Sharon's seedy, time-textured back stoop, which amounts to a borderline hovel. It's funny how a faulty picnic-table umbrella, a sloppily constructed deck and a testy sliding glass door become veritable plot points.

"Detroit" is reminiscent of Edward Albee's brutal realism (see "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?") and Tracy Letts' murky, psychotic dark comedies (see "Bug" and "Killer Joe"). It spins out of control in strange and troubling ways. And yet it's as consistently hilarious as it is horrific. One can only hope the interest in this hypnotic, titillating show will spread like wildfire.

THEATER REVIEW

"Detroit"

Grade: A

8 p.m. Wednesdays-Fridays; 3 and 8:30 p.m. Saturdays; 5 p.m. Sundays. Through Oct. 19. \$20-\$30. Horizon Theatre, 1083 Austin Ave. N.E., Atlanta. 404-584-7450, horizontheatre.com.

Bottom line: Lurid. Intense. Irresistible.