

Theatre Review: 'Detroit' at Horizon Theatre

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Horizon Theatre's season opener is a dynamite production of Lisa D'Amour's award-winning (Pulitzer finalist, 2013 Obie Award for Best New American Play) "Detroit." It premiered at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre in 2010 and had an Off-Broadway run in 2012. It plays at the Horizon through Oct. 19.

"The center was not holding. It was a country of bankruptcy notices and public-auction announcements..." So begins Joan Didion's brilliant essay on the 60's called "Slouching Towards Bethlehem." Ms. D'Amour wrote her play in the middle of the worst economic downturn in generations. "Things fall apart," as W.B. Yeats said.

But what's more American than a backyard barbecue? Steaks on the grill—and keeping up a cheery front. "Detroit's" got it covered. By the way, the name "Detroit" is more metaphoric than literal; this could be any suburb near any American city.

Mary and Ben (Carolyn Cook and Mark Cabus) are a middle-aged couple who have a pleasant house in the burbs. Ben has lost his job as a bank loan officer "I'm a deadbeat," he deadpans cheerlessly, and says he's starting a website for people getting out of debt. Mary works as a paralegal.

Mary and Ben have two new neighbors: a young couple named Sharon and Kenny (Kylie Brown and Adam Fristoe). They are both recovering drug addicts, substance abusers who met at a rehab center. Their house next door is rented and falling apart; Sharon works at a call center and Ben at a warehouse.

Mary decides that a cookout is just the thing to welcome their new neighbors, and take her and Ben's minds off their own problems. By the way, we only see the backyard patios of both houses, not the insides; and Mary has made the unsettling discovery that the younger couple *has no furniture*.

Now the fun really begins: At the cookout all kinds of personal quirks, hang-ups, and fears begin to rear their heads. "You're British, aren't you?" Sharon asks her neighbor Ben, as though it were a crime. He's not, but she gleefully persists in her "accusation." Meanwhile, Ben will say something like "What's it like being an alcoholic and drug addict?" to Kenny and Sharon, but the latter two remain outwardly serene and even amused.

"You've got to live in the moment, Mary!" says Sharon. It becomes apparent that the younger couple have an affinity for doing just that, and slowly Ben and Mary are drawn into a devil-may-care attitude.

But things fall apart (even furniture). Despite her attempts at backyard banalities, Mary is screaming inside. "What's going to happen to you?" she asks the young couple, but the question is just as much to herself and her husband. Fear, paranoia, and panic begin to rear their heads. What's the remedy?

How about a night of bacchanalian revelry? Okay, this may be going too far, but—you'll have to decide for yourself.

This play is carefully and subtly crafted and works brilliantly in the Horizon's intimate playing space—one of my favorites in the city. Lisa Adler's direction is outstanding; she fully understands that underneath the fireworks (and yes, there are some) these people want to connect; and the pace, power, and dark humor are bracing. Moriah and Isabel Curley-Clay's set is flawless, as usual.

Tom Thon appears near the end as Frank, a man who lived in the neighborhood years ago; he tries to make sense of things, but his appearance has the feel of a *deus ex machina*. If Ms. D'Amour had left him out, she might have won her Pulitzer; just a thought. It's certainly not Mr. Thon's fault.

The acting is uniformly excellent. Carolyn Cook has never been better; and if you know her body of work, that is saying something. Ms. Brown, perhaps better known for her appearances in musicals, is a revelation. With this performance she proves that she is a serious actor to be reckoned with.

Mark Cabus's Ben is at times maddening and at times heartbreaking; and Adam Fristoe manages to make us care about a young man whom it is difficult to trust; but we end up rooting for him.

Actually, we root for all four of the main characters, for in the end it's their humanity that wins us over.

"Detroit" is not a perfect play (what *is* that, anyway?), but it certainly is a reminder of the excitement that only live theatre can generate. The show is for adults; I wouldn't miss it.

For tickets and information, visit horizontheatre.com.