

Excess dialogue undermines potential of 'Nocturne'

By Ruth Ross
Correspondent

When is a play not really a play? When it's a monologue. And when is a monologue not really a monologue? When it's more like a novel read to the audience by four different characters.

That's the conundrum posed by "Nocturne," a "sort of a play" by novelist-playwright Adam Rapp, now receiving its New Jersey premiere at Luna Stage in Montclair. In the troupe's previous production, "The Kreutzer Sonata," a monologue more like a play, the narrator managed to effectively convey the conflict so necessary to drama and made us want to know what happened. But "Nocturne's" long, descriptive passages, mostly narrating plot development — albeit in beautiful language filled with evocative imagery — rob the work of a sense of immediacy, of any urgency about why this story must be told, making it ultimately uninvolved and not very dramatic.

Without specific directions from the playwright, director Juan Souki has taken what was a single character in the play's workshop version and split him into two, without much rhyme or reason. Cary Gant and Oliver Henzler both

play/speak the role of the protagonist, a 32-year-old writer who, one July night 15 years before, killed his 9-year-old sister in a tragic automobile accident, an event that has haunted him — and paralyzed him — ever since. In addition to his own broken ribs, the accident rent apart his parents' marriage, his mother's sanity and his own relationship with both, most notably his father. Forgiveness and redemption are two themes in play here: can the unnamed character called the Man forgive himself, can he forgive his father for almost killing him and can his father forgive the Man for killing this adorable little girl who was apparently the apple of everyone's eye?

What could be a compelling story is blunted by too much talk delivered by four talented actors. Speaking the most words, the two male actors had some trouble remembering their opening weekend. Nevertheless, Henzler as Man 1 effectively conveys the vulnerability of the young man haunted by an horrible act; his psychic pain is evident in his eyes and nervous body language. As Man 2, the other character playing the protagonist, Gant appears much stronger, less affected by the collision and its aftermath. Worse, his role and purpose are ambiguous. Is he Henzler's

alter ego? Is he a much stronger part of the Man's personality? The ping-ponging of the two actors' dialogue is confusing and irrelevant.

Sistina Giordino is winning as the Sister, the wise child whom we first encounter even before the play begins, lying prone onstage and coloring pictures. Her youth and innocence make the subsequent accident even more poignant, especially since we don't see it but just hear about it in great detail from the Man's lips. A terrifically free-spirited Lindsey Beeman provides excellent support as the Red-headed Girl with "gray-green eyes" the Man meets in New York but with whom he cannot establish a relationship. The scene between the Redheaded Girl and the Sister jumping on a mattress and reciting titles of books collected and read by the Man in his 9-foot by 9-foot room as a means to escape his thoughts is charming.

Juan Jung's spare set eloquently conveys a childhood suddenly ended, what with broken china, chairs, baby shoes and toys glued to the wall and a pop-up house in a piano bench evoking the blonde brick ranch house in Joliet, Ill., inhabited by this doomed family. Carrie Yacono's lighting and Marcelo Anez's sound enhance the atmosphere, from a

carefree summer night's ride in a 1969 Buick Electra with Steely Dan blaring on the radio to the tinkling piano notes of a classical nocturne. Amelia Dombrowski's costumes effectively point up the Sister's innocence and the Red-headed Girl's Bohemian nonconformity.

Since a nocturne is a "musical composition that suggests a tranquil, dreamy mood," calling this play "Nocturne" is a stark contrast, for the tortured soul of the Man stands front and center of the piece. That he once studied the piano, practiced for hours and entered competitions might be a clue to the title's meaning, but it's a stretch. As performed at Luna Stage, "Nocturne" appears, despite some great acting, to be more novel than play and is ultimately dramatically unsatisfying. Perhaps, as in many cases, the book will be better.

"Nocturne" will be performed Thursdays at 7:30 p.m., Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 8 p.m. in the 43-seat intimate Stage 2 at Luna Stage, 695 Bloomfield Ave. in Montclair. For tickets and information, call the box office at 973-744-3309 or go to www.lunastage.org. Luna Stage is wheelchair-accessible and assistive listening devices are available.