

Youngblood Reviews for... **RED LIGHT WINTER**

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Bright Future – Youngblood's Red Light Winter

Milwaukee's theater world hasn't been overwhelmed by good news lately. Companies have folded, come close to imploding, or survived through severe cuts and reduced performances. Offerings have been solid, but since the demise of Theatre X and Bialystock and Bloom several years ago, there has been a decided lack of adventure on our stages.

All of which makes Youngblood Theatre's production of *Red Light Winter* a cause for cheer and lifted spirit. Don't mistake me. Adam Rapp's bleak and brutal play isn't exactly a play of great uplift. But to see a young company take on Rapp's play with such brio and unflinching nerve – and with such affecting skill – warms the theater-loving heart.

Rapp has been a cause celebre in some theater circles for a while now (to many, he's a sort of bad-boy genius), but it's the first time he's been produced in Milwaukee. That's not surprising – his plays are smart, merciless, and often harsh (he makes David Mamet seem like Kauffman and Hart). And *Red Light Winter* is no exception. It starts in the Amsterdam Red Light District, where two friends are traveling. Davis (Andrew Edwin Voss) is buff and beautiful and knows it, and he does his introverted playwright friend Matt (David Rothrock) a favor by hiring him a prostitute for the night.

A fairly simple premise, to be sure. But Rapp uses it to let his characters reveal themselves in startling ways, peeling away layers of emotional armor and camouflage to get at dark, vulnerable truths. *Red Light Winter* contains moments of both unflinching brutality and almost unbearable tenderness, and its great tragedy lies how the characters' own desires keep them from the possibility of happiness.

Director Benjamin James Wilson orchestrates the music of this play with great skill. Rapp's language – particularly his alter ego character, Matt – is full of whip-smart verbal excess full of name dropping (Raymond Carver, Tim Burton, Jean-Luc Godard) and surrealistic puns ("Rome wasn't built in a day-care center"). Rothrock's evocation of Matt's nervous chatter is Woody Allen channeled through John Hughes' Brat Pack with a healthy dose of Beat Poet thrown in. Voss's Davis, by contrast, is Brendan Frazer blowhard, spraying testosterone sweat as he Jackie-Chans his way into a room. Christina, the hooker with the heart of glass, unveils layer after layer as the play goes on, and Tess Cinpinski gives her just the right blend of guarded sensuality and aloofness.

Friday's performance at the Alchemist Theater was sold out. And judging from the post-show buzz from an audience, which included many Milwaukee theater professionals, there will be a lot of talk about this production and about Youngblood's future work. I'm sorry to say that this is the first time I've seen them (I missed their three productions this summer), but they are definitely a company to watch.

~ Paul Kosidowski

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Milwaukee Journal Sentinel January 22, 2010
New Youngblood Theatre gives life, heart to contrived 'Red Light'

Since the play's 2005 world premiere, the buzz surrounding Adam Rapp's "Red Light Winter" has concerned its full nudity and violent sex. But its core involves an old-fashioned love triangle, in which everyone loves someone else and nobody wins.

The Youngblood Theatre Company is giving "Red Light" its Milwaukee premiere, and the good news is that this exciting new ensemble is for real. But, despite the 2006 Pulitzer nomination for Rapp's play, I'm not sold on it.

"Red Light" opens well. Boon companions Matt and Davis, onetime college roommates who are now 30, are in Amsterdam, taking a break from everyday life in Manhattan.

Matt needs one. His writing career is stuck in neutral. Davis has stolen his former girlfriend. He hasn't had sex in three years. He hasn't slept in weeks. And he has lost 20 pounds to a nasty virus.

Extremely bright and even more self-conscious, Matt lives in his head, talking far too fast to hear those around him, while taking himself and the world much too seriously.

The glib and worldly Davis believes that all Matt needs is a prostitute. He duly delivers, showing up with the young and beautiful Christina in tow.

The ensuing half-hour of "Red Light" is flat-out thrilling theater.

Showing off for Christina, Matt and Davis reveal the many fault lines in their complex friendship, which cover the gamut from homoerotic longing to jealousy, from admiration to rage. Under Benjamin James Wilson's direction, Youngblood's actors bring a ferocious, crackling energy to Rapp's witty dialogue.

David Rothrock's Matt is a tightly wound spring, seething with intensity and emotion that he has neither the courage nor the conviction to fully express. As Davis, Andrew Edwin Voss lights up the room, nailing a character who must be both boyishly charming and horribly cruel.

Once Davis leaves Matt and Christina to their tryst, "Red Light" never again brings the friends back together onstage, and Rapp loses his touch in sketching their separate relationships with Christina.

To her credit, Tess Cinpinski gamely suffers the limitations imposed by her role, refusing to overplay her hand in a search for meaning that isn't there.

I can't say as much for Rapp, whose play increasingly resorts to contrivance and melodrama, turning up the volume long after running out of things to say.

~ Mike Fischer

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Third Coast Digest January 22, 2010

Review: Youngblood Theatre's Red Light Winter

The words most associated with Red Light Winter are “sexually charged” (and that is certainly true) and attention-getting, but it's the subtleties of personality that sustain this charge — fueled by friendship, love, envy and despair.

Red Light Winter, written by Adam Rapp, was a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Due to nudity and sexually explicit situations, it is intended for mature audiences only. Performed by Youngblood Theatre (now in their second season) and directed by Benjamin James Wilson, this production has intensity and clarity. The setting of the Alchemist Theatre is an ideal spot for this play; the space is small and intimate, and the occasional traffic sounds from Kinnickinnic Avenue only add to the created world of the stage.

Youngblood Theatre's Red Light Winter runs through Feb. 6. Image from website.

We begin in a seedy Amsterdam hotel; the dingy plaster and red glow through the bleak window give a sense of transitory space. It's a place to stay for a moment, and it forms the backdrop for a single night that reverberates through the lives of the three characters: Matt, the scrawny, awkward, and pained writer; Davis, the frat boy intellectual; and the shadowy, multi-layered Christina.

This play is not out to win any feel-good awards, and it gains poignancy as a game of emotional chess. The interplay of personalities is like psychological quicksilver; the dynamics palpably change as characters enter and leave. The first act is especially lively with the verbal sparring between Matt (David Rothrock) and Davis (Andrew Edwin Voss), punctuated by the watchful, mysterious Christina (Tess Cinpinski). One of the surprising things about this production is the number of laughs the actors were able to bring out. It's a crummy hotel, and emotions run high, but in the midst of this there are many moments of brash and vulgar hilarity.

The energy of possibility fuels the first act, while the second takes on the aftermath. The trio's entanglements develop into something of an amorous food chain — one is loved by another, who is in love with someone else, who in turn couldn't give a damn. Underlying questions are not neatly wrapped up and resolved: why is Matt so tormented? What cements his friendship with his opposite — the rakish Davis? They antagonize and annoy each other, but there is a deep-seated bond between them. Rothrock consistently brings out the despair and charming wit of Matt, while Voss adroitly reflects the changeability of Davis — one moment he's an arguing intellectual, the next moment, a chauvinist louse. Cinpinski, as the enigmatic Christina, unpeels her character like an onion, holding back with slight intimations, and then revealing secrets with quiet explosions. She works between these two like a magnifying lens, while her exterior independence is modulated by a growing inward vulnerability.

The story's narrative is straightforward, but the psychological underpinnings are complex. The motivations, weaknesses and desires of each person create fantasies of what someone else could be to them. They may have known each other for hours or years, but how well do they really know each other at all?

~ *Kat Murrell*

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Shepherd Express – Curtains

January 22, 2010

Flawed But Provocative Red Light Winter - Youngblood's 2nd Season Opens With An interesting Drama

Adam Rapp's Red Light Winter is a provocative exploration into the nature of human intimacy and the emotional end of sexuality. Though the plot is remarkably well constructed and there are some really brilliant bits of dialogue, the play's action and its allegorical nature are ultimately very, very unsatisfying. That being said, Youngblood's production of the drama, running now through February 6th at the Alchemist, is well worth the \$12.00 ticket price—an exceedingly good night at a very cozy theatre.

There is very little in the production that isn't really well executed. The play opens in an excessively shabby motel room in Amsterdam. Scenic Designer Evan Crain has framed the set at a skewed angle that makes for an interesting visual dynamic, but the sets for both the first and the second act do suffer a bit from a limited budget. David [Rothrock] and Andrew Edwin Voss play Matt and Davis—opposite ends of the same type of creative personality. While Matt is a very sensitive intellectual—a struggling playwright who suffers from depression and feelings of inadequacy, Davis is a confident extrovert—a successful editor at a publishing company. As the play opens, Davis hopes to cheer-up Matt by bringing a prostitute named Christine (Tess Cinpinski) back to the hotel room.

The ensemble works really well together and we get the opportunity to see them in action right away as all three are in the hotel room for most of the first act. Voss has a dark intellectual charisma about him as Davis. Rothrock's heartfelt performance as the dreamer intellectual is brilliant. For various reasons, the character could come across as kind of an obsessive creepy, stalker type. Rothrock gives the character enough intellectual stability to make his neuroses seem reasonably well-adjusted. Cinpinski makes for a really compelling mystery girl. The one little problem here is that her unique kind of stage beauty doesn't seem quite obvious enough to appeal to a character with Davis' less refined sense of aesthetics. And there are moments where Matt, who is falling deeply in love with Christine over the course of the brief conversation between the three of them, mentions tiny, little details about her personality that don't seem all that present in Cinpinski's performance, but both of these criticisms are splitting hairs. The unspoken emotional end of Cinpinski's performance is brilliantly subtle . . . more than making-up for any tiny flaws in her performance.

The cast delivers a profoundly intricate chemistry onstage that fully takes advantage of the complexity of the characters as witnessed through their dialogue. As stated above, however, the script is ultimately flawed. As complicated as these characters seem intellectually, the allegorical nature of the plot limits their behavior to only the most basic of human interactions. The characters end up seeming like profoundly complicated people who are ultimately very simple—a quality that gives Rapp's play a sort of "myth of fingerprints," feel to it. Yes, we are terribly complicated individuals with terribly complicated personalities, but once you get beyond that, we're all just basically the same people with the same drives—it's how we react to those drives that makes us different. And while I want to believe this, I don't. It seems terribly oversimplified to me, so the play ends up feeling very, very unrealistic and, well . . . allegorical. That allegory ultimately undermines the profound realities of human emotion that the play is trying to explore. I believe that underneath all those complexities that make up our identity, there are even greater complexities of chance and circumstance that make us all terribly convoluted human beings. If Rapp's Red Light Winter were to have acknowledged this, it would've been much better. That being said, the Youngblood Theatre production is really good—one of the better shows of the season so far. It's well worth seeing.

~ *Russ Bickerstaff*