

The American Plan

by Richard Greenberg, directed by Kim Rubenstein

Old Globe Theatre • February 23-March 30, 2008 (Cassius Carter; Opened 2.28, rev'd 3/15e)

With allusions to the divisive waterways of both 'Paradise Lost' and 'The Great Gatsby,' Richard Greenberg has created his own literature about how isolated people misuse love to escape their melancholy in 'The American Plan,' a 1990 drama only now receiving its West Coast premiere. Wrapping her balanced staging around the haunting central performance of Kate Arrington, director Kim Rubenstein lets the play's impressionistic portrait of characters at sea resonate.

Greenberg sets the American play beside a lake in the Catskill Mountains, across from a resort hotel offering affordable week-stays packaged under names like 'The American Plan.' It's 1960, four decades after Adolph Hitler's Nazi Party began setting German Jews adrift with platform points like "No Jew, therefore, may be a member of the nation," and 12 years after the founding of the nation of Israel. A flat square of grass covers the Cassius Carter's stage floor, diagonally bisected by a wooden walk that points to the distant hotel at one corner and, in the opposite direction, to the residence of Eva Adler (Sandra Shipley), her daughter Lili (Arrington), and Olivia (Sharon Hope), the maid who has earned membership in the family.

The lake intrudes somewhat into the set, with enough depth to allow Nick Lockridge (Patrick Zeller) to rise out of the water for his sly first entrance. Lockridge, whose name not only recalls Fitzgerald's writer-narrator but also evokes the terra firma that Lili will see in him, is a minimally successful writer staying at the hotel. The set's seating is provided by a neglected rowboat and some iron lawn furniture. (Wilson Chin designed and Chris Rynne lighted the playing area, which adds another page to the Old Globe's textbook illustration of how to create environments without benefit of a single vertical surface.)

The Adler house is odd in ways Greenberg is careful not to specify. Whether it has the appearance of a museum, mausoleum or boathouse, Lockridge and Gil Harbison (Michael Kirby), another intruder from the other side, are both surprised to find that people live in it.

Rubenstein, whose listed credits run towards larger productions, most recently as Associate Artistic Director at Long Wharf Theatre, shows that she is equally comfortable in a chamber size staging. She has a gift in Arrington, who seems to intuit moment-to-moment exactly when her character is showboating and when she's sinking. For the highly intelligent and damaged Lili, the hindrances to fulfillment are different than the WASPs who partied between the World Wars in 'Gatsby.' The Adlers are Jewish. Eva escaped "by boat" but has made her daughter an heiress to effects of that evil.

Lili has become an individual island within a family island within the ethnic island that represents the Jews in post-War America. Her final listless encounter with the out-reaching Nick exhibits only vague remainders of what might have been self and strength. The loss feels complete when we learn, in a nicely buried aside, that she is devoid of independence from her mother's sense of furnishings, even after Eva has died.



**Kate Arrington
Sandra Shipley**

PHOTO CRAIG SCHWARTZ

CONTINUED



Patrick Zeller
Michael Kirby

SCHWARTZ

The role of Eva provides great dramatic opportunity as far as it goes, and Shipley does well pawing, clawing and pouncing through the dominatrix' cat-and-mouse games with the other characters. However, here we need more definition than Greenberg's impressionistic style provides. Eva's complexities, and her murky relationship with her late husband, need a little more bricks and mortar to help us see where she's coming from. Filling in the blanks with 'The Holocaust' is too nebulous and too easy. There is more at work here. Greenberg's discomfort with supplying this material is evident in a scene at the top of Act II, an uncharacteristically clunky bit of exposed exposition about Lili's father does more to stop the storytelling than illuminate it.

Greenberg has great affection and affinity for words, and character names like Nick and Lili can justifiably recall writer Nick and troubled Daisy of that earlier masterpiece. There, of course, the concern was achieving the American Dream (or perhaps demystifying it so it wasn't so seductive). Here, the American Plan is less oppressive, more diffuse. It is a state of freedom, from persecution (as Eva has sought), from convention (as Gil proposes in his pursuit of love), and from self-destruction (as Lili vainly hopes).

Zeller, Shaw and Kirby meet the demands of their roles without going overboard. Kirby, another of the Old Globe's UCSD Masters students, does well in what appears a featured role debut. However, a few more outings will strengthen a performance quality that is already very promising.

In some ways, 'The American Plan' is the American play: a statement for a larger canvas in which Greenberg offers a shadow world complement to Fitzgerald's seminal portrait of blind American ambition torpedoed by fraud. Here, at the dawn of the 1960s when prosperity seemed within reach of anyone willing to dive in a go for it, old wounds and generational protectionism were weights that would not be ignored. Not dealing with demons only meant that any effort to make it to "the other side" opened one up to being grabbed by the darkness and pulled under.

– Cristofer Gross

WITH Kate Arrington, Sharon Hope, Michael Kirby, Sandra Shipley, Patrick Zeller **PRODUCTION** Wilson Chin, set; Emily Pepper, costumes; Chris Rynne, lights; Paul Peterson, sound, Leila Knox, stage management