

The Metro

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Dragon Productions Presents

Brilliant Traces by Cindy Lou Johnson

THE SMALL but enthusiastic Friday-night audience at Dragon Productions' latest offering, *Brilliant Traces*, insisted on a second curtain call from two actors who, a minute earlier, had faded to black on the barest bone of emotion. As poetic as Cindy Lou Johnson's play is, only actors with immense depth could handle the silences, the lengthy self-revealing speeches, the strange transitions, without dropping character. It seems as though Tom Gough (if you've only seen him silly or singing, check this out) and Meredith Hagedorn have absorbed Henry and Rosannah.

The reclusive Henry is living alone in the Alaskan wilderness when Hagedorn's post-breakdown character, Rosannah DeLuce, stumbles into his cabin. To his slow pace and reticence, she brings a motor mouth. Plus her every retort is a mistrustful challenge. She resists Henry's urgings to explain how in two days she got from the doorstep of her Arizona wedding to his desolate snow haven 3,000 miles to the north. Johnson often gives these characters dialogue that straddles poignant and funny: "You can't control your life when you've got people running around in it," says Gough in a Keanu Reeves kind of way. Gough's Henry stays immersed in doleful confusion through these comical lines, so it's easy to feel the pain through the laughter. Even when the characters seem torn to the nerve endings, their twisted logic amazes and amuses. And this particular audience got it, in bouts of "silly human race"-type laughter during some of the most tense emotional scenes.

Not only that, but the play sets up wonderful sexual energy from the moment Henry starts to undress Rosannah, just after she passes out on his floor. Johnson toys with this tension throughout—in a hurried, forceful kiss, in Henry's references to his past—so that in spite of the aura of romance, there's always a hint of question around Henry's intentions. Under John T. Aney's direction, Gough carries this tension through the early part of the one-act play, never rushing through a silence. When Henry slowly, slowly washes Rosannah, the scene dances between spiritual worship and surreptitious lust.

In one of Johnson's most poetic moments, Rosannah tells Henry how "disconnected, hovering, alone" people, like her jilted fiance, suddenly seemed to her. "No one wants to wake up." Nervously hushing, Hagedorn backs away. "They'd wake up screaming." Here, Hagedorn creates a searing image that connects her character to our universal apprehension that the world as we know it is unstable. She joins Johnson in taking aim at consensus reality and baring its fragility.

While Henry describes losing all reference points during a snow storm "white-out" (Gough deftly makes this feel like remembered experience, not explication), Rosannah tries to explain her fugue lapse and the impressions leading up to it. Johnson's language becomes most poetic (and difficult), as rational characters try to come to terms with the irrational. "There's some wild energy in you flinging out to anything in your path—and I am in your path," Henry says to Rosannah.

All these verbal flights of unhinged reality take place within the woody walls of a cabin that Aney has kept simple, rustic, but homey, cozy; isolated but not claustrophobic. On both a visual and instinctual level (and due to remarkable synergy among Aney, Gough and Hagedorn) the cabin walls, like the encounter, offer a grounding force and a refuge. The pacing of the two characters, one fast, the other slow, starts to blend and merge. Henry comments that love just drops in your lap, and in a word he reveals the play's simple plot: What will you do when love drops in? This riveting Dragon Productions presentation sidesteps the standard violins-and-fireworks, instead tapping an aspect of love that is wild and precious as life in a remote, frozen cabin.