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U.S. Drag Dragon Theatre

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Planes did not fall out of the air nor all ATM screens go completely blank as was predicted, but according to Gina Gionfriddo's 2002 master's-thesis-born play *U.S. Drag*, something did happen to all those twenty-somethings we now call Millennials as we all crossed to the other side of 2000. Inept at meaningful conversation, prone to emotional outbursts of every sort, and operating in either the extremes of self-centeredness or of dogged determination to save the world, the early-twenties characters she parades before us in this darkest, nastiest of comedies are society's privileged children gone totally amok in a world where fear, boredom, and 15 minutes of fame for everyone reign. Dragon Theatre follows up its 2013 staging of Gionfriddo's *After Ashby* (a strange, dark comedy about American obsession with grizzly crimes and the stars they sometime produce) with this play that raises questions about just what kind of lives young adults can hope to have in today's reality-TV-like world they star in.

Recent Vassar graduates, already ex-Conde Nest screw-ups, and totally BFFs Angela and Allison are on the hunt to "do nothing and get money for it ... and have people know who I am." As they explain to their apartment mate Ned (a friendless, Wall Street nerd prone to crying fits) why they cannot pay rent, "You can't expect us to go out at night and be fascinating and have jobs, too." What they can do after a night at the clubs is follow home a cute do-gooder named James with the promise to sign his petition to save a murdering mom from the death chair—just for the free booze and cab-fare home, since they are totally broke. Or, they can join the group SAFE ("Stay Away from Ed," Ed being a stalking serial killer currently rampaging the city) headed by Evan, who constantly shouts, "I just want to help .. I am a helper." They join SAFE in hopes of coming across the villain while hanging the group's posters around town so they can somehow grab him and get the \$100,000 reward money. These are women who cry because they have never had the luck, like a woman they read about in the paper, to have been a victim of an awful crime and then go on TV, write a book, and make millions. Such are their dreams of fame and fortune. And, along with nervous, self-centered Christopher who has written a New York Times best-selling memoir based on fabricated facts, and an Ed-surviving victim, Mary, who is seeking her few minutes of payoff in front of cameras, such are the kinds of people they meet in that pursuit.

Liz Frederick and Olivia Haas portray Angela and Allison, respectively. When they are bickering and

bantering together, the play is at its best. Each brings a combination of "don't-bother me about you ... it's me-me-me" attitudes to everyone and every situation they meet. They casually listen to others without hearing, look blankly at another's angst and then move on to scheme together "what's in this for us," and generally are both hilarious and pitiful in their callous, crazy look on life. Dressed to the nines in skirts up to their butts, heels high and pointed, and slinky tops hanging loose with breasts about to pop out at any moment, they are on the prowl for that husband or one-nighter who can make life their well-deserved easy-street forever. And failing that find, they are quite willing to create their own path to fame using their smarts, looks, and maybe even lies. Liz Frederick and Olivia Haas command the stage and the evening as Angela and Allison and are the best parts of Ms. Gionfriddo's script.

Jeremy Ryan is James, an unemployed do-gooder ("on a small inheritance") fascinated by crimes against women (as seen in his scrapbook of victims' pictures), and dedicated to saving condemned murderers (especially of their own children) from the death penalty. He is also socially awkward with a silly smile, barks in choppy phrases more often than speaking in normal sentences, and is desperately looking for wedded love and affection.

Ryan is one of several quirky quacks that Angela and Allison accumulate in their journey to somewhere other than a normal workday world. William Gaoiran is their three-piece-suited roommate Ned of Wall Street, who sits cocooned in corners, responds to questions in whiny two-word answers, and demands in sudden outburst that the girls throw a big party and find him some friends. Peter Ray Juarez's buzzed-on-the-sides-of-head/maned-on-top Evan frequently reminds everyone in shouted frenzy that he is a helper as he stands on street corners and in meeting halls rallying his pro-SAFE crowds in a "Don't Help" campaign (since it seems the attacker Ed approaches victims first asking for help). "A good Samaritan is a dead Samaritan," he preaches.

Lauren Hayes is the quiet Mary with blackened eye who survived an Ed attack but now revels a bit in her role as victim. She hangs on meekly but with determined focus on the edge of this bizarre collection that Angela and Allison have somehow collected, clearly looking for her move to something better than what she has now. Maria Costello jumps as needed into a variety of roles from bookstore manager to bartender, offering the one bit of everyday world to this set of rather unworldly characters.

Besides the two best-bud women, the other real stand out in this ensemble is Josiah Frampton, the creepy, needy, but ever-calculating author Christopher. Sitting in a ball hugging a pillow, nervously twitching his feet and hands, with eyes that switch directions in a flash, Christopher is brilliant in his ability to create a life story of abuse by toxic parents that others believe, though when pressed by Allison, he admits has no truth in it. "That my parents hung me is my truth," he coyly admits with cocked head and slight smile. His intensity of getting into another person's face to talk or of suddenly bursting into uncalled-for diatribe is visceral and startling. His newest, outlandish book, "U.S. Drag," is so bizarre that it is maybe believable.

Nöelle GM Gibbs directs this multiple-set play at a pace that works, especially for a playwright's first script that sometimes loses punch in the second half as the story ebbs and wanes in strange attempts at romantic couplings. Scott Ludwig's oft-changing scenic design relies on cleverly rotating walls whose resets occur mostly unnoticed in the background of Lance Huntley's appropriately modern-beat music. Katie Barrus goes all out in her costuming of the two leads in their many club-night outfits that clearly speak of privilege even if not employed.

The one character always present but never met is Ed, but we come to realize that there is something oddly and disturbingly Ed-like in most of the people we do meet. What is it about current society that we revel in headline stories of fear that turn into fantasies we dream about? Why do we inwardly and secretly get excited when we hear there is now a tenth, eleventh, or more victim and are a bit relieved that the perpetrator has yet to be found? What does it take to be famous, and why do we listen starstruck to the

talking heads on "The Today Show" that we do? Gino Gionfriddo poses these and many more questions in this, her first disturbingly rich play, and Dragon Theatre delivers a *U.S. Drag* that does not work every minute but overall works just fine.

U.S. Drag continues through February 28, 2016, at Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway Street, Redwood City, CA. Tickets are available online at dragonproductions.net or by calling 650-493-2006.

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