

Beau Jackett and
Ashlea Potts in Eugene
O'Neill's *Diff'rent*.
Photo: Jef Hall-Flavin.

Diff'rent

by Rebecca M. Alvin

As one might expect from a Eugene O'Neill play, *Diff'rent* is despairing in tone, with characters whose emotional lives dominate the plot. In addition, it will come as no surprise to anyone who has seen or read an O'Neill play that the writing in *Diff'rent* is purposeful, tight, and perfect in its lack of unnecessary embellishment. In the current production, directed by Jef Hall-Flavin and starring McNeely Myers, O'Neill's words are brought to life by a remarkable blend of professional and community actors. The play is performed this weekend at the Provincetown Theater and then next weekend, it will be performed at The Boatslip, as a part of the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival (of which Hall-Flavin is also Festival Director).

Diff'rent opens with a poignant introduction wherein all of the characters whom we will meet (including different aged versions of the lead characters), interact silently, setting the tone for this deeply moving piece. After this brief prologue, we are introduced to a 20-year-old Emma Crosby (Ashlea Potts) and her beau, the 32-year-old Caleb Williams (Beau Jackett). The couple sit together in the Crosby family sitting room, discussing their wedding, just two days away. It is in this conversation that the major theme of *Diff'rent* is immediately expressed. Emma tells Caleb why she loves him – because he is different than the other men in town. When he protests against her putting him upon a pedestal, she takes great pains to explain that it isn't that she thinks he is "better" than the others; it is that he is "different" from them, and in that way, like her.

Shortly after this romantic tête-à-tête, Emma learns from her brother, Jack (Andrew Clemons) that Caleb, who is the captain of a whaling vessel, has had an indiscretion while away at sea. Shocked at the notion that Caleb would fall prey to the feminine wiles of "brown women," while away at sea (for two years at a stretch, typically), Emma definitively calls off the engagement and swears off marriage – again, not because she is jealous or hurt by the incident, but because the incident itself tells her that Caleb is not different; he is very much the same as any other man.

In the second act, we meet Emma 30 years later, played now by McNeely Myers. We see her entertaining Caleb's nephew Benny (Andrew Eldredge), just home from serving in the Army. In a very humorous opening to what will ultimately be a devastating act, we see that in her aging, Emma still clings to romantic notions of "difference" and that her decision not to marry has led to a painfully lonely life in which the hope of love with the much younger Benny has been her only light. For his part, the older Caleb (Tony Jackett), has held a torch for Emma all these years, despite her consistent rejection.

The performances in this production all bring O'Neill's work to life, but special mention must be made of Myers, who is, as usual, wonderfully affecting as the desperate older Emma. In addition, Eldredge plays the cruel, selfish Benny so naturally and effectively that I think I would cross to the other side of the street if I saw him in real life. There is also a lovely set designed by Micheal Steers, and Hall-Flavin does an excellent job of pulling together a cast with diverse experience levels.

But ultimately, it is about the writing. What a gift it is to be able to see a play by O'Neill – particularly one so rarely seen. O'Neill explores the universal theme of lost ideals in this play, all wrapped up in a critique of sexual repression. Most importantly, it is rare to see a play written with such precision and emotional weight these days. *Diff'rent* is not about silly gimmicks and supposedly "daring" material – it is pure, challenging theater and you are a fool if you miss the chance to see it here.

Eugene O'Neill's "Diff'rent" is performed Thursday, Sept. 16 through Sunday, Sept. 19 at 7:30 p.m. at the Provincetown Theater, 238 Bradford St., and then, Friday, Sept. 24 - Sunday, Sept. 26, at various times at The Boatslip, 161 Commercial St., Provincetown. For information and tickets to the Provincetown Theater performances, call 508.487.9793 or visit www.provincetowntheater.org; For the Boatslip shows, contact the Provincetown Tennessee Williams Theater Festival at 866.789.TENN or visit twptown.org.