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REVIEW: THE MILK TRAIN DOESN'T STOP HERE ANYMORE

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Tennessee Williams is known for his very personal stories and his troubled characters. The Milk Train – a play about death – has a distinctly ominous feel peppered with delightful moments of comic relief and ridiculousness. When the play first showed on Broadway in 1963, it failed critically, was heavily despised and a disappointment to many. Since then, however, it has been on the rise. Fred Abrahamse's rendition of this highly symbolic play is an artistic triumph, taking its heights only higher.

The play tells the story of Flora 'Sissy' Goforth (Jennifer Steyn), a wealthy old woman who has been widowed four times in her lifetime. As she sits out her final days in her extravagant estate in Italy, she dictates her dramatic memoirs of life and love to her secretary, Frances 'Blackie' Black (Roeloff Storm). Living up to her name, she doesn't try to fight death, but pointedly ignores the fact that she is susceptible to it. So when she is unexpectedly visited by the young poet Christopher Flanders, her first reaction is to attempt to seduce him.

Jennifer Steyn is breathtaking in her portrayal as Mrs Goforth and her lead carries the production to a deserved victory. Steyn's delivery of her many soliloquies is earnest and the steadfast spirit within the dying body shines through, highlighted by a deliciously precise comic timing. The costumes are also delectable with the dazzling opulence of Mrs Goforth and Tennessee Williams's fondness for Asian cultures apparent in the kabuki attire and samurai sword and robe.

Before curtain up, the music is as dark as the lights are low. The stage is washed with a bluish tinge- a forewarning that death is on the rise as the stage assistants rake the sand on the stage of the Artscape Arena. An almost ritualistic introduction by the assistants, dressed only in Japanese Hakama shorts, is an interesting start to what is revealed to be an interestingly directed play.

Both of the male stage assistants (Nicholas Dallas and Roeloff Storm) are required to play female characters, which could be seen as comedic at times but they pull it off. Marcel Meyer as Flanders correctly achieves the lack of sexual interest he has for Mrs Goforth, despite her best efforts, and instead portrays a more caring approach to the old lady.

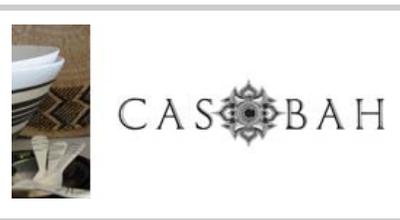
The play is one known to be filled with allusions to fairy tales and mythology, underlined by countless references to truth. As such, a little knowledge or homework on Williams' script can go a long way towards appreciating its form on stage.

This very deep and dark play, set on a sparse stage dominated by a large portrait of Goforth, is an interesting piece of work by Williams and is paired well with the masterful eye of Abrahamse. Ultimately the audience becomes attached to the protagonist despite her flaws which – like everything else in her life – are extravagant. Abrahamse's portrayal of her death, grouped with Steyn's superb acting, William's script and the constant drumming on the theme of death, makes for an unmissable drama.

Lauren Vogt

The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore took place at the Artscape Arena- Artscape Theatre Centre and runs until 19 October 2013.

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