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REVIEW: When Fringe Meets the American Canon (Part II: *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens*)

BY DAVID FOX ON SEPTEMBER 10, 2019 • (LEAVE A COMMENT)



Rob Tucker in *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens*. (Photo courtesy of Ego Classic Theater)

Welcome home, Lane Savadove!

Of course, that's a wild overstatement. As anyone who has paid attention to Philly's

cultural life knows, Savadove—and EgoPo Classic Theater, of which he is Artistic Director—have been a vital force in our community, bringing us season after season of fascinatingly conceptualized and often brilliantly realized productions.

It's just that many of us were introduced to the company's work through their premiere Tennessee Williams season, now almost 15 years ago.

I remember it vividly. First, there was the delightful surprise of programming *Vieux Carré* and *Something Cloudy Something Clear*, rather than the far more famous and obvious works. Even more striking was that EgoPo brought to both of them a vivid sense of theatricality and highly personal voice, along with the kind of insight that made these shows live on in my memory long after I'd actually seen them. (To this day, I can recapture the moment I saw the *Vieux Carré* set, and thought with a thrill, "Wow!—this company really gets it!")

This year, as EgoPo approaches a theme season devoted to the works of Sam Shepard, Savadove and company briefly revisited Williams with a Fringe Festival mounting of a true curiosity: *And Tell Sad Stories of the Deaths of Queens*, a sometimes frustrating but also fascinating play-in-miniature.

Though *Sad Stories* would not see the light of day till 2004, Williams began writing it nearly 50 years earlier and continued to tinker with it for several years. This places *Sad Stories* among a continuum of plays that includes *Orpheus Descending*, *Suddenly Last Summer*, and *Sweet Bird of Youth*—all of them works that increasingly frustrated critics, many of whom, I wager, panicked at the recognition of gay subtext.

There's nothing subtextual about the gay themes in *Sad Stories*; on the contrary, the play astonishes and draws us in through its spectacular frankness. From the very start, Candy Delany, our hero/heroine (played here by the great Rob Tucker), unflinchingly describes the details to Karl, a thuggishly sexy pick-up (Nick Ware, very good) unflinchingly. She (her pronoun), though first seen in male garb, is more herself in female drag; her life, similarly, involves multiple roles: as an interior decorator, nightclub habituée, and perhaps most strikingly, the landlady of a former slave quarters, which she now has turned into apartments, and rents to outsiders similar to herself.

As a play, *Sad Stories* left me with mixed feelings. On one hand, I was impressed, even bowled over, but it's forthrightness and candor. At the same time, it's impossible to ignore elements of mawkishness and self-pity (starting with the title, a riff on a speech

from *Richard II*, of course). Even for a 45-minute dramaticule, it's short on action.

But Williams is always Williams, even at his most... shall we say, diffuse; and there are enough glimmers of compassion and brilliant wit to make it worthwhile. More than worthwhile—for fans of American midcentury drama, *Sad Stories* is a must.

Especially when given the exceptional production it gets here from the EgoPo team. Savadove (who directs) and scenic designer Dane Eissler have adapted an open exhibition space at the Asian Arts Initiative into a miniature garden apartment complete with pond and footbridge, whose fantasy *Chinoiserie*—screens, scattered cherry blossoms, tea table—carries exactly the right blend of glamour and kitsch. Actors Kerry Jules and Charlie Barney bring vivid presence to the supporting roles of Candy's two tenants.

Most of all, *Sad Stories* enshrines a knock-out, bravura performance by Tucker. In his first moments on stage, nattily attired in a brocade dinner jacket, pouring champagne and working the room with easy wit, Tucker might be channeling Bobby Short. (Now **there's** an idea: Rob Tucker, who also sings and plays piano, in a one-man show about Bobby Short! Who's on board?) Later, as Candy slips into a negligee, Tucker's performance hits still greater heights, capturing with translucent humanity in the character's mix of fierce pride and vulnerability.

Alas, *Sad Stories* had only a few performances here in the Philly Fringe. Next, it moves to Provincetown's Tennessee Williams Theater Festival for seven performances from September 26th through 29th.

I'm hoping that EgoPo might eventually bring it back again to Philly. Till then, we have Shepard to look forward to!

For more information about EgoPo Classic Theatre and their upcoming Shepard season, visit the company's website (<https://www.egopo.org/>).