

Bug

Bottom Line: Another Tracy Letts shocker, wonderfully staged, that literally will take your breath away.

By Jay Reiner

May 2, 2007



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*The Coast Playhouse, West Hollywood
Through June 3*

Welcome to "Bug," the original roach motel. This is Tracy Letts territory, guaranteed to make your brain snap to attention and your skin crawl.

Letts is the playwright who gave us the quirky, disturbing "Killer Joe" a few years back, which the Lost Angels Theatre Company nailed beautifully. This time around, the Angels have outdone themselves in a production the devil himself would envy.

Paranoia is the seductive theme of the evening, and no play or playwright I know of has explored the subject with such hard-edged brilliance. "Bug" taps into our worst fears -- both nameless and named -- the ones that used to surface only on rare occasions but these days threaten to erupt with alarming frequency. For the play's central characters, there is no safe ground, no escape; even their bodies have been invaded, and everything, no matter how harmless or innocent, bites back.

We're in a cheesy motel room on the outskirts of Oklahoma City where waitress Agnes (Amy Landecker) is holed up doing cocaine, guzzling booze and living in fear of her violent ex-husband (a scary Andrew Hawkes), who has just been released from prison. Agnes, despite the attentions of her lesbian friend R.C. (Laura Niemi), is lonely and very vulnerable.

Enter Peter (Andrew Elvis Miller), a Gulf War drifter with a seemingly sensitive nature that shades into something slightly creepy. After some initial wariness, the two wind up in bed together, and that's when the fun starts. With a little love to build on -- and perhaps because of it -- Peter's paranoia ignites, and the next morning the bugs start to appear. It's not long before Agnes is seeing them too, even in Peter's blood, which he obligingly puts under a microscope for her. Does she see them now? "Millions!" she exclaims.

The tension is mounting rapidly and so is the horror as Peter's mind starts to spill out its cracked contents. In one notable scene, Peter pulls out his own bloody tooth, believing it to be infected with egg sacs planted by a secret government agency that is using him as a guinea pig. In another scene, stunningly realized by Landecker, Agnes delivers a crazed monologue that neatly

encapsulates nearly every paranoid fantasy and scheme of the past 75 years.

At this point it's clear that Agnes is now crazier than Peter (if that's possible), but on the other hand, is Peter crazy at all?

This is the play's most chilling twist. Several things happen, including the entrance of the strange Dr. Sweet (Rob Nagle), to make us wonder whose view of reality is true. Perhaps the bugs exist after all. Perhaps we, the audience, are wrong about everything we were so sure of a moment ago. Perhaps -- and this seems to be the point -- the world in which we now live is more than a little like the world we're watching come apart ... and for similar reasons.

Landecker and Miller are remarkable in the two central roles, but the entire company shines. Director Scott Cummins and fight choreographer Ned Mochel, as they did for "Killer Joe," have staged the violence for maximum effect. Lindsay Jones' sound design -- trucks whizzing by, helicopters overhead -- adds immeasurably to the evening's impact.

If you don't mind nudity, gore, self-mutilation and graphic violence, "Bug" is definitely your cup of comfort. But I'd examine the contents carefully before drinking it down.

BUG

Lost Angels Theatre Company

Credits:

Playwright: Tracy Letts

Director: Scott Cummins

Assistant director: Christian Levatino

Set designer: Robert G. Smith

Lighting designer: Leigh Allen

Costume designer: Gelareh Khalioun

Sound designer: Lindsay Jones

Fight choreographer: Ned Mochel

Cast:

Agnes White: Amy Landecker

Peter Evans: Andrew Elvis Miller

Jerry Goss: Andrew Hawkes

R.C.: Laura Niemi

Dr. Sweet: Rob Nagle

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