

The cast is on fire, but Suse Sternkopf's *Slow Thunder*, now getting its World Premiere at NoHo's Theatre 68, is (as *The Buckingham*s phrased it in their 1967 hit) kind of a drag.

Unfolding over the course of a (very) long evening's journey into day, *Slow Thunder* transports us to Vieux Carre (pronounced "View Car"), a Southern Illinois town whose skyline is dominated by a 170-foot bottle of Brooks Tangy Catsup.

It's here that 50something Jewel (Ann Noble) spent her formative years before moving to New York to work as an intellectual property attorney.



She's back in Vieux Carre now, however, and living in the house her deceased grandmother once called home, a formerly ramshackle residence that's been restored to its original pristine state by building contractor Rob (Rob Nagle), Jewel's friend from their college days, and if the closet full of his clothes is any indication, her current housemate ... and maybe more?



Tonight, however, it won't be just the two of them sharing dinner, since who should show up "like slow thunder" on his 1990 Harley Davidson Softtail Fatboy but Jewel's New York painter/poet lover Peter (Robert Yacko), the first time the twosome have seen each other

since he ghosted her following the suicide death of his longtime best friend (and maybe more?) Garrett.



Completing *Slow Thunder*'s cast of middle-aged singles is Jewel's high school bestie, local NICU nurse Roberta "Bird" Tanzen (Sue Gisser), as overtly sexual as Jewel is tightly wound, and (as Rob not so delicately puts it) "already on her way to sloppy," a state of intoxication she quickly achieves once the foursome sit down to a dinner of takeout falafel, white wine for the three who drink, and lemonade for teetotaler Peter.

As the evening progresses, there's a lot of talk about a lot of different stuff (with some great big words occasionally thrown in for good measure), none of which I found all that interesting, particularly as I kept trying to remember just who was who to whom.

In other words, despite a promising start, the more I got to know *Slow Thunder*'s cast of characters, the less I enjoyed spending time with them, not to mention that there's an attempted three-way that comes seemingly out of nowhere.

Jewel I found especially off-putting, and though I understand how a lifetime of losses—her grandfather, her father, her grandmother, and her best friend all within five years, then her husband, and then her "anam cara" (Gaelic for "soul friend")—might not make for the cheeriest of hostesses, the anger seething beneath Jewel's composed exterior ends up more grating than endearing,

What *Slow Thunder* does have going for it are four fabulous actors doing fabulous work under the playwright's own direction.

L.A. stage treasure Noble delivers an edgy, acerbic, bravura star turn as Jewel, and never more so than when the aforementioned repressed anger finally reaches the surface and explodes.

Nagle adds yet another dynamic characterization to a list of local theater credits a mile long, and the chemistry he and frequent costar Noble ignite on stage is as palpable as their work is electrifyingly in-the-moment.

It's a treat too to see musical theater treasure Yacko in dramatic mode as a man Bird quickly sums up as "sex incarnate," and Gisser a ball of fire in town sexpot Bird's platform heels.



Slow Thunder's production design team (scenic designer Allen Corben, lighting designer Miles Berman, sound designer Janna R. Lopez Råven, and costume supervisor Lolly Wrigs, and music supervisor Lobelia Lawson, none of whose work I've seen before) prove that you don't need a sky-high budget to look and sound topnotch. (A minor quibble: If the script says it's a pitcher of "lemonade," make sure it's actually lemonade and not obviously just water with some lemon slices in it ... or change the script.)

Slow Thunder is produced by Corben for bAfA TheatreWorks. Berman is stage manager and Mallory Corben is assistant stage managers. Ken Werther is publicist.



With its star-studded ensemble, I was hoping that Slow Thunder's combustible mix of friends and strangers would make for a compelling ninety-five minutes of theater. Unfortunately, despite the best efforts of all concerned, I ended up finding Slow Thunder slow going.

Theatre 68 Arts Complex, The Emerson, 5112 Lankershim Boulevard, North Hollywood.
Through November 12. Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8:00. Sundays at 2:00.
<https://www.tickettailor.com/events/bafatheatreworks1/1021480#>

–Steven Stanley
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Photos: Imageworks