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## The Eccentricities of a Nightingale



A woman lacking "beauty and desirability and the grace of a woman" must necessarily be honest. And for such a woman, an hour is enough to make an entire lifetime, for in that small span of time, even if you failed, "you and [she] have been honest together." Damaso Rodriguez's production of Tennessee Williams's seldom-performed "The Eccentricities of a Nightingale" at A Noise Within also manages to impress in us more than the mere two hours, and it does so with complete honesty of who its main subjects are, regardless of what they symbolize.

The rewrite of the author's earlier "Summer and Smoke," "The Eccentricities of a Nightingale" avoids the symbolic separation between flesh and spirit in the earlier play for a story of two real opposite-minded people who come together at a crucial point in their lives. Alma Winemiller (Deborah Puette), daughter of Reverend Winemiller (Mitchell Edmonds), is a spinster who has her eye on the newly arrived Dr. John Buchanan (Jason Dechert) from Johns Hopkins, her neighbor next door. Her talent shows while comparing looking at a telescope with the young doctor looking into a microscope, and the stuff they look into are described as "part anarchy, part order." Although he is pressured by his mother Mrs. Buchanan (Christopher Callen) to marry a normal girl of the village, he nevertheless admires Alma for her spirit, which shines through when she tells the proverb of "learning to walk over snow without making a footprint" as a prerequisite for knowing how to love someone, or really a declaration of objectivity.

Alma's mother Mrs. Winemiller (Jill Hill) is psychotic, frequently recalling the time when the Musee Mechanique of her sister Albertine's lover Mr. Schwartzkopf burned down. She keeps telling stories of how he mortgaged all the toy peacocks and contraptions in the museum to buy a big snake, which swallowed a blanket. Alma invites John to a gathering of intellectuals at the Winemiller's, and though he agrees, he arrives late, and is dragged away by his mother after she makes up an unsubstantiated excuse.

Puette and Dechert chemistry builds right from the outset, as they can give off intimacy without looking at each other until the last second, much as the fireworks that touch off the play. At one point during the meeting, John takes the submerged spoon out of the punch bowl for Alma, and we can only briefly glimpse an air of intimacy between them that is quickly washed over by Mrs. Buchanan (called a tigress by her son for protecting him so well). Those "surgeon's hands" are admired by Alma from afar as she never sleeps before he does. Puette's longing look from the window does not come across as desperation, but one betraying her eccentricities.

The meeting at the Winemillers' is a mix of different personalities who each leave quite an impression. Roger Doremus (Dave Kirkpatrick) vouches for a manifesto to "crystallize in our minds" what the group means, and is serious in purpose. Mrs. Bassett (Jacque Lynn Colton) is more practical, declaring the meeting minutes to be skipped using the "winner's philosophy" of caring only for the present and future,

not the past. Vernon (David LM McIntyre) is a dreamer, and has been trying to have his verse play read during meeting the last three times. Instead, Rosemary (Darby Bricker) read his essay on William Blake's "Love's Secret," which said, ironically to "never seek to tell thy love," and since Alma told, "trembling, cold, in ghastly fears" he would depart. The group's dynamic is exceptional, as each balances the other, giving the audience in a short amount of time a sense for Alma's inner vision.

Dechert's portrayal of the practical doctor is sparing and leaves a sense of the mysterious. Perhaps the most revealing moment comes when John talks about Einstein's theory of curved space-time, which leads Alma to believe that the universe is a prison. Alma has come to John after the whole group meeting episode, afraid that her heart has skipped some beats, but John immediately checks out the situation and makes the correct and practical read that Alma is fine but lonesome. Dechert smokes his way through much of the play, never giving himself away. His actions are deliberate and his manner is matter-of-fact. Even when he invites Alma to a Mary Pickford movie, his intentions are masked, as we never really find out how he feels about her except by his own words, that she's admirable.

Puette's performance is flawless. From her green dress to symbolize availability to her "cavalier's plume" as an emblem of her rebelliousness, Puette dresses the part. After the movie date, Alma tells of Doremus's proposal of marriage, which the practical Buchanan interprets as his way of earning a better living. But to Alma, everything comes back to spirituality and aesthetics, as he loathes of thought of being intimate with Doremus. Puette waxes poetic while telling the story of her aunt Albertine, the nightingale of the Delta, whose man Schwartzkopf had two marriages without a divorce. Puette could not be stopped in this narration, telling us how she herself was named for Albertine, who ran off with the mechanical bird enthusiast.

The climax of the play comes with Puette and Dechert at a hotel for which an hour was going to make a lifetime. Twisting her ring, Puette's Alma sacrifices a plume to the fire and quotes a poem finished by Dechert's John: "If I wore a gold sword on a white verandah, I would shock a simple heart with my heartless candor." And this honesty, which Alma calls a failure, is finally what we appreciate most. That nightingale which used to sing doesn't sing any more in the epilogue, but that final scene with a traveling salesman, forecasting an hour in "Tiger Town" reminds us that Alma could only tell the truth, and one hour can indeed change one's life.

"The Eccentricities of a Nightingale" is performed at A Noise Within (<http://www.anoisewithin.org/>) in Glendale, California, until 28 of May, 2011.