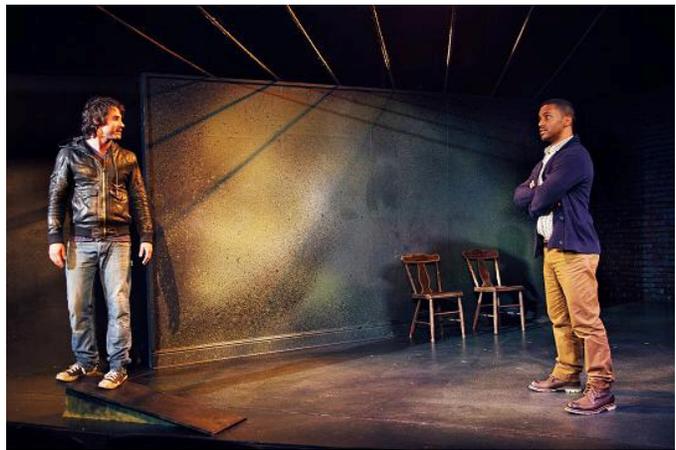


Theater in Los Angeles: World Premiere of Gary Lennon's "A Family Thing" by Nathaniel Grey

For a good playwright to seamlessly weave comedy and drama they need the skillful hand of a diamond cutter. Playwright Gary Lennon exhibits such skills with the world premiere of his play *A Family Thing* at Stage 52 in Los Angeles. It's no wonder that he has a Peabody Award. Described as darkly funny, *A Family Thing* unveils the painful conflict that keeps a family of brothers apart while offering a fully fleshed out group of characters. What can be attributed to Lennon's finely crafted words is shared by a multi-talented cast playing off each other as if they had portrayed these characters for years.



Sean Wing and Darryl Stephens

photo by Danielle Larsen

When Sean Wing, as youngest brother Sean, runs onto the stage, we discovered that not only is he teetering on the edge of a bridge, but at the end of his existence. Suddenly, motivational speaker Joe, played by Darryl Stephens happens to be in the right place at the right time and talks him down from his pain ending plunge. Within a matter of moments, Wing's performance captivates the audience as their hearts empathize with his convincing portrayal of a charming young man without hope. Neglected by parents, raised and abused by hoodlum brothers he now ponders every waking moment as if it were his last, living in the shadow of his newly paroled brother's vow to kill him for being Gay.

Once more Stephens exhibits a wide reaching range, as we have seen from his sometime naive and sensitive title character on Noah's Arc to the intelligent, and more masculine lawyer of Logo's DTLA. As a prince charming to Wing's lost boy in distress, Joe convinces Sean that he



Elizabeth Regen, Darryl Stephens and Andrea Grano photo by Danielle Larsen

still has choices and comforts him to bed. But in this case, while it may seem rushed in the literary sense of character development, these two actors are delightful as that cute couple that everyone admires. A duo you could simply sit and watch for hours as they share past intimacy about their lives.

Johnny Messner, formerly of the ABC series *The Gates*, is the ex-con brother, Jim, whose rage filled prejudices show that his release from prison is destined to be nothing more than a U-turn. He meets with Louise, played by Elizabeth Regen, who works



Darryl Stephens and Sean Wing photo by Danielle Larsen

for Choices, a non-profit group which assists felons in acclimating back to the real world. We discover that Louise is a recovering klepto now on the path to the straight and narrow, so it's of no surprise that she also steals her scenes. Regen's performance and accent are so on target, you'd swear you can see sand on her feet from having stepped right off the Jersey shore.

Saverio Guerra is one of those guys you saw on that show you forgot the name of. The kind of actor that everyone recognizes but can't remember where they saw him. As a

comic character for many seasons on the Ted Danson series *Becker*, Guerra, glows as the just-fired older brother also living in fear of the former resident of cell block H brother. His casting is paid off in spades as he struggles to come to terms with his inability to provide for his wife and disabled kid, personal regret and fallout of his dysfunctional family past. Andrea Grano, Maria Cina and Paul Caramagno complete the cast with equally impressive performances.

When a play opens with a stark set consisting of a brick wall, tattered wallpaper, a few chairs, table and bed, one fears for the quality of the production. But not in this case. The set takes a very distant back burner to the words of the playwright and enriched performances from the cast. The journey takes us from the edge of traffic and a sleazy hotel room to an office and hospital and despite the minimal props and decor, it's the actors who bring about a complete transition which can only succeed in live theatre.

The play provides an effective reminder of how assumptions and unspoken feelings can destroy the core of a family. As these characters quickly discover that first impressions and fearful reactions can often blind us to the truth about those we love and hope to be loved by in return. In this production we witness how the tears of tragedy can become the glue for a stronger and better future.

At the end of the roughly hour and forty minute show, and a well-deserved standing ovation, I suddenly realized that there had been no intermission. When you can make it through a theatrical presentation without looking at your watch or checking your phone, you have just witnessed a rare example of theatrical excellence. When voices, faces and words unify with a touching and amusing rendition of life that is so rarely found on stage or screen.



Maria Cina and Saverio Guerra photo by Danielle Larsen

Produced by The Echo Theater Company, Lauren Bass and Chris Fields, *A Family Thing* runs through March 17 which is a relatively short run for what this theatrical jewel deserves.