



Review

Welcome to the Woods

Off-Off-Broadway, Play
Theatre: Witzenhausen Gallery

by Darron Cardoso



Robin Riker and Glory Gallo in Welcome to the Woods. Photo by Paul Lomax.

BOTTOM LINE: The kind of theater that makes actors want to be actors. Three actors in a really cool space telling a really great fairy tale-esque story.

Sometimes we go see a show in New York and we get to see something that makes us proud and happy to reside in a city that offers such rich, original, creative and thoughtful theater. It's a wonderful feeling when something reminds us how grateful we should be to live in New York City. The International Theatre Laboratory Workshop's production of *Welcome to the Woods* is one of those things. The play by Alex van Warmerdam is receiving its U.S. premier directed and adapted by Erwin Maas. It tells the story of a woman named Dora who flees to the woods with her friend Fannie in an attempt to escape marital strife. While in the forest, the two women meet several beings; some mythical, some real, but each one reminding them of what they were trying to get away from in the first place.

The three actor show is engrossing from the second you step in to the world of the play. The site specific show takes place in the Witzenhausen art gallery and it has been transformed into an abstract forest. When the door to the room is opened and we are welcomed to the woods, the show begins. The entire floor of the room is covered in mulch and we see a character sitting at a table looking tired and world-weary. As the audience finds a seat in one of the fifty different kinds of chairs that surround the playing space, she continues to sip her tea and contemplate her future. One of the actors shuts the door, locks it, the lights go out and the journey begins. Dora (Glory Gallo) is ready to leave her husband and go to the woods to get away from him. She meets up with her friend Fannie (Robin Riker) and off they go on their adventure where they meet a variety of Forest Creatures all played by Jonathan Co Green. All three actors are great. They each get to be funny and serious and every emotion in between. Gallo has a wonderful vulnerability and naivety but still shows a sardonic streak. She plays Dora as a woman who wants more but isn't sure what else it is that she should want. She thinks leaving her husband Edward will make her happy, but it isn't until she is in the woods that she realizes that her problems there are they same as they were at home. When Dora realizes this truth, Gallo plays the moment with heartbreaking reality and sadness. Her look of realization and hopelessness stays with you long after the performance has ended.

As her friend Fannie, Riker is funny, sarcastic and sexy all at once. She serves as Dora's cheerleader and confidant but has secrets of her own that slowly leak out as the two make their way through the woods. She is one of those actors who can take any line and make it funny. "Fry an egg" is not a particularly funny line, but in Riker's possession it gets a huge laugh. The chemistry that the two women share is undeniable and it is easy to believe that they care a great deal for each other. Green has the arduous task of playing every other role in the show. From a satyr to an elf to an old woman, he manages to create at least seven distinct characters each time he is asked to don a different costume piece. He has a twinkle in his eye that is both charming and mischievous and each character reminds the women of what they left behind.

The show is a dark fairy tale. Like Little Red Riding Hood, it warns us of the dangers that we may come across when we leave the safety of our homes. The lighting and set design are a seamless incorporation. With a variety of household lamps coming out of the woodland ground, it's as if the world Dora has escaped to is the same world she left. Even the program says that the location is The Woods/Our Living Room/Our Minds. Dora and Fannie can run as fast and as far as possible but they will never be able to run away from themselves. Director Erwin Maas takes full

advantage of the huge playing space and effectively makes the spectators a part of the story by having some of the action happening behind the audience. By doing this, it forces the audience to accept that they too are part of Dora and Fannie's world. For a space with no official backstage, Maas has done a wonderful job of creating entrances and exits for his actors and even though the show is in the round, the action is always completely accessible. The sound design also is wonderful with the chirping of birds blending in perfectly with music by The Eurythmics and the soundtracks of cartoons.

Overall, I really loved this show. It was not just theater. It was like an art installation at the Witzenhausen Gallery had come to life and I got to be a part of it. The story has a moral like every good fairy tale should so you leave with a lesson learned. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, if you ever go looking for your heart's desire again, you may not need to look any further than your own backyard. Because if it isn't there, you never really lost it to begin with. With great performances, an interesting and funny script and solid direction, this show is a winner. And if that isn't enough, they also give you free Heineken. I would have loved the show without the free beer, but it was the icing on the cake.

Welcome to the Woods plays November 14th to December 10th, Wednesday through Sunday at 8:00 pm except for November 25 through 27 when there is no performance due to the Thanksgiving Holiday. All performances take place at Witzenhausen Gallery (232) at 548 West 28th Street, Second Floor; between 10th and 11th Ave. Subway; C/E to 23rd St. The running time is 75 minutes. Tickets are \$18.

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