

Visit provides a 'Reckoning' for four disparate characters

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Relationships can create some of the most challenging issues in life. That much is a given.

Trying to realistically depict relationships in fiction can be equally challenging. Once a writer gets going, characters, plot lines and dialogue can often have a way of sounding artificial or contrived – the product of someone’s imagination rather than a natural representation.

Some playwrights get it right, their plays seemingly holding a mirror up to life. That’s definitely the case with Traci Godfrey and her new (2015) play “Sweet Texas Reckoning,” receiving a thorough, virtuoso staging

by Panndora Productions at downtown Long Beach’s intimate Garage Theatre.

Godfrey’s superbly crafted comedy-drama can be described antithetically yet accurately as hard-hittingly nuanced. It’s very much along the lines of, and in some ways surpasses, any of the great works of Horton Foote, known for his lifelike dialogue and realistic approach to characters whose roots are often in the Deep or Rim South.

We’re at the home of Ellie Westcott in the small town of Sealy in Austin County, Texas. Ellie Wolcott (Rebecca Taylor) is expecting a visit from her daughter Kate, who years earlier moved to New York City to pursue a career as a dancer and choreographer.

Ellie has told Kate’s childhood friend Alan John (Derek Long), nicknamed A.J., of her impending visit. A.J. has carried a torch for Kate for years, and now that she’s divorced and returning to Texas, he sees a chance to propose – a scenario that thrills Ellie.

Kate (Karen Wray) appears right on schedule, but from this point on, nothing goes as planned – not for Ellie, not for A.J. and not for Kate, who has brought along an unexpected visitor, Samantha (C.J. Williams), and who has much telling news for mom and would-be beau.

At first, we’re tempted to accept each character at face value, then dismiss them: Ellie is a slightly cranky, dyed-in-the-wool Southern Baptist with an often narrow view of the world, A.J. is a loud, boisterous redneck, and C.J. is a beautiful, elegantly urban young black woman.

Trying to define Kate would also tip Godfrey’s hand, and to reveal more would spoil the pleasurable effects of Godfrey’s text and Panndora’s staging, expertly directed by Pete Taylor.

Suffice it to say that Godfrey has more than a few potentially explosive surprises up her sleeve revealing family dysfunction and pain that’s both realistic and highly theatrical.

The “Reckoning” script rests perfectly between pure character study and a plot- or issue-driven play. That’s a difficult, demanding balancing act not often seen in live theater, and Panndora’s staging breathes life, texture and nuance into it.

Taylor's masterful direction informs his top-notch cast. Rebecca Taylor's Ellie is a wreck imprisoned by her own bitterness, social and cultural myopia and the fog of alcoholism. It's to her credit that we're able to look past her potentially egregious viewpoints and abhorrent deeds, past and present, and find a troubled soul deserving of redemption.

Long's A.J. is a rambunctious good-old-boy with an irrepressible love of life, but when the scenario he desires begins to slip from his grasp, he shows surprising wellsprings of affection and dignity. Williams' Samantha is a sexy, vivacious imp whose surface calm belies much inner pain, plus wisdom and insight unusual in younger adults.

At the center of it all is Wray's Kate, who has spent a lifetime running away from herself, her family and her true nature, and has finally, belatedly, come to a day of reckoning that's anything but sweet. Wray skillfully creates a complex, beautifully drawn portrayal that more than lives up to the role's full potential.

All four characters possess hidden layers and unseen reserves that not only drive the plot's many twists but that are also shaped by them. The actors draw vivid, realistic portraits that fuse with the text's huge belly laughs and heart-wrenching moments of pain – moments when Ellie, A.J., Sam and Kate face sudden, unexpected revelations.

Scenic designer Yuri Okhana's realization of Ellie's home overflows with details – most tellingly, the stashed liquor bottles and Ellie's unintentionally offensive collection of sambo figurines.

The fact that Ellie feels the need to hide her drinking yet is completely open about her demeaning view of minorities is just one indication of her warped priorities – and one of the play's rewarding particulars, so copious as to be nearly countless. And that makes "Reckoning" a treasure to be savored.

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