

Redwood Curtain, by Lanford Wilson. Directed by John Sowle.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman. Berkshire Bright Focus

"can't be lied to if you don't listen."



Lanford Wilson's play *Redwood Curtain*, one of his last pieces written in 1992, earnestly displays the truth of the consequences of revelation. A young half-Vietnamese girl, Geri Riordan, a piano-prodigy and professional at 18, seeks her natural father, a disabused, itinerant ex-soldier living among the fallen men who have sought refuge in a redwood forest in northern California. She finds a man who she believes is him and as he enters her life, and that of her aunt who has grown up in the woods, tended them and finally regretfully sold them to a developer, she learns more about herself and the lies of her existence. The play is a deeply moving

experience and in the production at Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill, New York, the playwright has been well served by the three actors who play his characters and by the director who shines an oddly personal light onto the story.

Julie Pham plays the teenager who makes up lies as needed to cover her own tracks, a role played by Lea Salonga in the made-for-television film version. Ms. Pham has a voice that penetrates the ear like an E-flat note, two octaves above middle C. There is a delicate coarseness to this Geri that makes her both compelling and abrasive. As played by Pham the girl shows us the result of her upbringing in a wealthy family and the oddly angry aftermath of a furtive search for identity. She is very much a teenager and at the same time very much a woman haunted by a past she cannot understand. It is an excellent dichotomy for any actress to play and Pham takes the physical risks of the role and lets them overwhelm the emotional risks at stake.



As her wealthy aunt Geneva, her adopted father's sister, Molly Parker Myers pulls out the stops of sophistication and opens the valves of a diseased conscience. Geneva adores her niece, believes she understands the girl, and remains competitive in some ways for the attention of the wayward soldier. A role created, and filmed, by Debra Monk Geneva is almost the soul of the story as she is the one who deals with the emerging truths about Geri's existence. Myers has a wonderful way with a line, allowing it to begin with a natural sound and end with a sophisticate's wit. She knows how to turn a thought into a consonant and frank

comment even when no comment is needed. However, she can also show the emotional force of a thought through a facial expression that belies the words she speaks. As a foil for her niece or a rival to the former soldier, she brings a definitive reality to the play which it needs a lot of the time for there is a mystical atmosphere about Geri that Geneva needs to bring to ground.

Geri has magic in more things than her musical ability. She can mesmerize a room, a forest glade or nature itself. Though this is never explained, it is commented upon, displayed and here the slight limitations of Bridge Street Theatre get in the way of this play's peculiar reality.



It is the work of Joseph Tisa as Lyman Fellers that solidly holds the play in thrall. His disenfranchised soldier/wildman gives the play a launching ground for the missile the play becomes as it slams honesty, blows up reality and destroys complacency. He has a wonderful stage presence and when he is on view he is what you watch. There is a definitive danger in his movement and his words. He combines humility with humiliation and makes the former overwhelm the latter even while appearing threatening. A hulking figure of a man his final appearance brings the mystical to earth. Jeff Daniels created the role and redefined it in the movie, but Tisa outdoes that actor with an angry honesty that is most compelling. Whether standing in the

background, which brings menace to the moment, or telling a story which does just the opposite, he is the final embodiment of Wilson's central idea in much of his work; he is the final stage of the returning Vietnam vet, the possessor of secrets both beautiful and staggering.

John Sowle has directed all of this perfectly. He has also designed the production and given it a haunting beauty. When Geneva expresses her regrets at her decisions we can see and feel the rationale in that statement. Michelle Rogers costumes perfectly suit the characters they define. Carmen Borgia's excellent sound design keeps the play eerily real. The difficult fight choreography by Zoe Kravitsky and Patrick Gaucher is as well played as it might be on stage in a theater where the audience is very close to the players.

Redwood Curtain is a play about explanations and to explain it here would be to violate the basic principles of theater. The audience must learn along with the characters how they and the world inter-relate. The honest truth about revelations is this: a laugh about a cry is worth two sighs in a redwood forest glade filled with ancient ferns. Get it? See the play.