

REDWOOD CURTAIN
Reviewed by Macey Levin

Lanford Wilson was one of America's foremost playwrights during the latter half of the twentieth century. Though he garnered his initial fame with the 1973 off-Broadway production of *Hot I Baltimore*, some of his later, more controversial, plays dealt with returning Viet Nam War veterans, in particular The *Fifth of July*, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1980, and *Redwood Curtain*, a vastly underrated play in 1993. It is receiving an intelligent and affecting production at the Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill, New York.

Geri (Julie Pham) is a 17-year-old Amerasian adoptee from Viet Nam visiting her aunt Geneva, (Molly Parker Myers,) her late father's sister, in Northern California at the outskirts of a redwood forest. This haunting and mysterious locale attracts Viet Nam vets who want to disassociate themselves from the greater society. Geri, a pianist who has toured the country and Europe and has a Sony recording contract, has put her immediate life aside to search the forest for her American father.

She follows one of these bedraggled men, whom we get to know as Lyman, (Joseph Tisa) out of town into the redwoods until they confront each other. She questions him as to whether he knows, or perhaps is, her father. He rejects her attempts to explore his past and instead bullies her to give him her purse and wallet. A mystical element enters the play as she insists she has the power to affect the atmosphere and does so to impress and frighten Lyman. After a physical tussle she faints and he retreats back into the woods. Geneva finds her in the glade, brings her home and attempts to dissuade her from the search and to return to where her genius lies... the piano.

Geneva's family has owned and logged the forest for decades, but she is now being forced out by a corporate maneuver. Though suddenly wealthy, she sees a bleak future for herself. Just as the centuries-old trees are going to be destroyed leaving the forest grounds decimated and rootless, Geri, Geneva and Lyman will have no place to call theirs.

Wilson is commenting on the tendency of American society to repress its past as it fearfully wends its way to an uncertain future. Geri wants to know her history and fantasizes, if not outright lies, about her early life in Viet Nam as she banters with Lyman. He is in the forest so that he doesn't have to confront the demons that plague him. Geneva is protective of her family and is apprehensive regarding the potential discovery of her step-niece's father.

The first scene is somewhat tenuous in that exposition comes pouring out in some labored exchanges. When Geneva appears in the latter part of that scene the plot structure strengthens as the mystery of family secrets and flaws are revealed in

realistic and pointed dialogue. On the whole, the script grabs you as it leads its characters through revelations and acceptance.

The cast creates specific identities in their roles. Ms. Pham is quirky as an adolescent on the doorstep of maturity while she brings a grounded strength as she searches for her father and forsakes what she considers the peripheral elements of her life. She infuses this dichotomy into her physical presence as well. Geneva is finely tuned by Ms. Myers. She is a wisecracking realist who feels threatened by what she doesn't know. She covers her apprehension with some of the best laugh lines in the play, but we can read something else in her eyes. It is a role that could be played broadly but she resists that and makes Geneva a sympathetic character.

The character who ties the plot together is Lyman. Mr. Tisa captures the pain of his life and the fear that surrounds him. He is dirty with his matted hair, shaggy beard and grimy clothes. But it is his soulful eyes and hesitant speech that defines his psychoses.

This is a script that could be maudlin but that doesn't happen under John Sowle's sensitivity and sensible direction. Where characters could become caricatures he has guided his cast into insightful performances. Despite an awkward fight in the first scene, his stage pictures, especially in the last moments emphasize the various conflicts and resolutions.

Sowle has designed the atmospheric lighting and sets in collaboration with Harry Mathews who created the realistic tree sculptures. The music room in Geneva's house suggests the wealth of her family. Michelle Rogers' costumes underline the characters' status and personality.

The Bridge Theatre's production of this neglected play is worth the trip. It is a touching human and theatrical experience.

A side note: As a further incentive, Catskill is an attractive town not only with the Bridge theatre but it also has terrific restaurants. Just down the street from the theatre is Winkle's Bakery that serves breakfast and lunch. All the food is made daily in their kitchen including most of their breads. Sandwiches and platters are huge but the rices are not. A short distance way at 353 Main Street is the New York Restaurant. They have a full menu from wings to steaks, but they have Polish specials. The Golabki (stuffed cabbage rolls, rice, sirloin, house seasonings, creamy mashed potatoes) is absolutely delicious.

Bridge Street Theatre presents Redwood Curtain by Lanford Wilson; Directed by John Sowle; Cast: Julie Pharm (Geri) Joseph Tisa (Lyman) Molly Parker Myers (Geneva); Scene/light Designer: John Sowle and Harry Matthews; Costume design: Michelle Rogers; Sound design: Carmen Borgia; Stage Manager: Caedmon Holland; Running Time: Bridge Street Theatre, 44 W. Bridge Street, Catskill, NY; From 11/2/2017 – 11/12/2017

