

Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre premieres grim new play 'Lucky Time'

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The Actors' Theatre is located inside the Santa Cruz Art Center on the edge of downtown, and when you arrive, chances are you will have to walk a few blocks from your parking spot through this liminal zone where the city becomes neighborhoods. There are rows of old Victorians heavy with shadows, and you may even walk down an alleyway that contains a person's only belongings, scattered in a huddle and hiding in a dark corner. When you make it to the theater, having witnessed something brutal about the reality of Santa Cruz, you may have this darkness imprinted upon your mind, and if so, then you will be primed for the show "Lucky Time" written by John Chandler and directed by Wilma Marcus Chandler.

The theater is a small black box, and all of the seats are good. It is an intimate setting to watch live drama, and this production uses proximity effectively. The set is spare, orderly and exacting. This Spartan discipline of the home we encounter offsets its haunted nature and builds tension as the characters move into a psychologically rich zone of disturbance. The artistic design of the set is brilliant. The ghosts move around the space — sometimes thinly veiled, other times inhabiting the room along with the living — and occasionally pierce through the membrane separating us from them with horrifying vehemence.

This production is a tour de force of acting that brings to life some really superb writing. The two main characters, Jeremy, played by Martin Kachuck, and Luke, played by Andrew Davids, bring the audience along on a disturbing psychological journey. Jeremy has broken down in a remote area of the woods in the mountains, and Luke has helped him change both his tire and his mindset. The stoic third generation local coaches the traveling appraiser on how to master his nerves and slow down his overactive mind to focus on one thing at a time.

This play is a nightmarish version of localism. Davids plays the land entitled Luke with a perfectly chiseled conservatism. He is a steward to his land and feels superior to anyone who lacks the integrity to understand what the land wants. This is not a communal, hippie type, but rather a version of a Central California native known to those who move here and find that it is not all love and roses, but that there is also a dark undercurrent of territoriality that lurks among the redwoods and oaks. Kachuck plays the neurotic outsider exquisitely, articulating his unfolding understanding of the situation with a strange mixture of admiration and fear.

Alfred Hitchcock lived in Scotts Valley and found inspiration for his famous movie "Psycho" from the Victorian buildings on Beach Hill. Chandler's play fits neatly into this tradition. It is a psychological thriller about a strange western man living in the mountains with a strict code of ethics and dark secrets. The ghosts, embodied visions of gruesome memories, make the production truly frightening.

Helene Simkin Jara plays one of those, Mrs. Grady, with terrifying force. Her voice will stay with you long after the play ends. Her deceased husband Mr. Grady, portrayed by Evan Hunt, is the ghost of a desperately afraid man, parading around in eternal ineptitude. Ann McCormick-Vickers is a sweetly haunting Marjorie, whose gracefulness makes her time on the stage that much more excruciating. Meanwhile, Stephen Capasso plays Luke's father with a dissolute lack of emotion. He is not a good father, and he is left to lounge around the home where he failed to raise Luke into a man with normal moral decency.

"Lucky Time" is a play that rides the edge between life and death, sanity and madness, drawing us into the home of a truly frightening character. It is a rollercoaster of psychological tension for those who enjoy the mystery of finding out what you may not want to know. If you are up for a fright, tickets for "Lucky Time" can be purchased by calling Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre at 831-431-8666 or going to www.santacruzactorstheatre.org. The production runs Thursday through Sunday, which is the final show.



Wilma Marcus Chandler, center, directs actors Martin Sampad Kachuck, left, and Andrew Davids during a rehearsal at Santa Cruz Actors' Theatre of local playwright and author John Chandler's "Lucky Time." Actors' Theatre is continuing its tradition of staging a show for the spooky season in October with the world premiere of the play. In "Lucky Time," a vehicle breakdown near a remote cabin leads to a night of wine, dangerous confessions and visitations from past misdeeds.

(Shmuel Thaler – *Santa Cruz Sentinel*)