How the West Was Bought: Aurin Squire on Broken Heart Land

17th November 2014

Sam Lopresti as Shep, Molly Callahan as Alma

Broken Heart Land by Vicki Lynn Mooney
Directed by Tony White

Lighting Design by Dov Lebowitz-Nowak
Costume Design by Li Murillo
Sound Design by HG Templeton
Set Design by Mitchell Ost
Stage Manager: Bethany Wood
Produced by Eagle Project

Cast
Molly Callahan, Margaret Champagne, Matt Cross, Jara Jones, Sam Lopresti, John Mazurek

Worskhop Theatre (Abingdon Theatre Complex)
312 W. 36th Street
November 6-November 16th

Passionate life and love is at the heart of *Broken Heart Land*, a new play by Vicki Lynn Mooney being produced by Eagle Project. The subject matter is a family pursuing land wealth at the turn of the 20th century through marrying off their half-Native American daughters to other respectable white families. By doing so, the families hope to consolidate the government land grants allotted to Native tribes in order to create mini-empire.

The land grants were initiated by the federal government as the barest amount of reparations they could give: 160 acres. Of course, like any attempt to help the less fortunate, it's the wealthy and connected who try to cheat the rules by creating family ties with people who are Native American enough to qualify for the land grant, but white enough to pass as 'European' in the circles of power.

Broken Heart Land centers on the marriage of one daughter in particular. Alma, a half-Cherokee 13-year-old girl, is still in mourning for her father when her mother practically sells her away into marriage with Shep, a ne'er do-well drunkard from a prominent local white family. From the beginning, their marriage is filled with fights, hateful words, and disdain. What seems like newlywed misunderstanding, hardened into Alma having a deep mistrust for Shep. As a wife she agrees to cook, host dinners, keep up the house, but loathes actual conversation or intimacy with Shep.

Alma finds true love in Shep's friend, Jimmy, who is also part Native-American. Their passionate flirtation grows into a romance. I don't think it's a spoiler to say this in a review. In fact, the inevitable and forbidden affair is telegraphed in the plays opening scenes pretty clearly. But the point of the romance isn't really about two trapped Native Americans finding love with each other, but the romance and many of the other plotlines serve as a framing device for the role women and marriage played in land acquisitions and wealth in America.

Broken Heart Land not only showcasing the untold stories of Native Americans but also through the eyes of the female protagonists who have so often stayed silent in the cowboy Westerns and 'cattle operas' of the 20th century.

Vicki Lynn Mooney has an ear for the time period, with a wonderful flavor for words and situations that are unique to the early 20th century in America. Her script and the dialogue feel lived in and real. Director Tony White does the best that he can with the restrictive space of Workshop Theatre. But some times it felt like this story just wants to break out of its confines, and explode into something more organic and surprising than a tiny black box proscenium with characters marching up and on to stage. Hopefully the play can get re-imagined and done again.

The actors were solid as an ensemble but some of the standouts were Margaret Champagne as the conflicted and complex mother who sudden widow status forces her into marrying off her daughters, and John Mazurek as the evil grandfather pulling everyone's strings. There is a palpable energy whenever their characters appear on stage.

For Eagle Project, this marks another successful production in bringing Native American stories to the stage. Let's hope this is the start of many more.

Aurin Squire *is an interdisciplinary artist/activist. Squire is a recipient of the 2014 Lecomte du Nouy Prize from Lincoln Center. His comedy Obama-ology completed a workshop production at The Juilliard School in September 2014. In December Obama-ology will receive its European premiere at Finborough Theatre in London. He has 2014-2015 artist-in-residencies at Brooklyn Arts Exchange, National Black Theatre, and has a Dramatists Guild fellowship this year as well. Last year Squire won the Act One Writing Contest at Lincoln Center Theatre. He wrote the multimedia film Dreams of Freedom that's in the permanent archives at the National Museum of American Jewish History in Philadelphia, PA. Dreams won 3 national awards. In 2013 his drama Freefalling was produced at Barrington Stage Company and won the 2013 Fiat Lux Award ("Let There Be Light") from the Catholic Church's Theatre Conference. In 2014 Squire won the grand prize in the InspiraTO Theatre's International Play Festival in Toronto (largest theatre festival in Canada) for Freefalling and the play was published in Dramatists Play Service's annual collection of Outstanding Short Plays. Article 119-1, his drama about a gay rights activist in Belarus, was produced in Florence, Italy, Norway, Vancouver, and Los Angeles in March 2014. Squire's comedy African Americana received its world premiere at London's Theatre 503 in June 2014. His plays have been seen off-broadway in New York City at Nuyorican Poets Cafe, Vital Theatre, ArcLight, Abingdon Theatre, Ars Nova, Lincoln Center Lab, Cherry Lane, and many other venues. Aurin Squire is in the Lila Acheson Wallace Playwriting Fellowship Program at The Juilliard School and lives in New York City.*