

Ancram Opera House, Ancram, NY

Still Life by Emily Mann. Directed by Jade King Carroll.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

Written in 1980, Emily Mann's "Still Life" explores the aftermath of the Vietnam War, which officially ended in 1975, and its lasting influence on three mid-western Americans. Using transcriptions of actual interviews with men and woman whose lives were affected by the conflict she constructed three characters, a Marine veteran with a deeply-seeded passion for killing, his pregnant estranged wife and another woman, an early feminist who has left her drunkard husband and attached herself to the Marine vet whom she admires and convinces herself she perhaps loves. Sitting at a table each one confesses to a single listener (played by us, the audience) the worst thoughts, acts and inspirations that move each of the three forward to a time when they can relate to other human beings in a more than human way.



Piper Patterson as Cheryl, Doug Harris as Mark,
Danielle Skraastad as Nadine; Photo: A-Key

In a fine production at the Ancram Opera House in Ancram, New York, three excellent actors are taking on these characters and defining their problems for a more modern audience. Piper Patterson is playing the young wife and mother, Cheryl; Doug Harris is Mark, the Marine who, having lost his only friend to a land mine, has taken his revenge on a Vietnamese family; Danielle Skraastad plays the feminist mother of three who denies them access to their father.



Piper Patterson, Doug Harris; Photo:
A-Key



Doug Harris, Danielle Skraastad;
Photo: A-Key

Director Jade King Carroll uses recorded music and photographs in projection to illustrate Mark's narrative culminating in a photo "arrangement he has titled "Still Life," a description taken from what is most often a painting of fruit and other objects. But the play's title means more than that. It refers to the three characters insistent phobias and problems from which they cannot free themselves and move on. Carroll makes it very clear that even leaving their confession booth tables cannot remove them from their difficult situations. They must return to their self-assigned places and continue their confessions. Stagnant compulsion is an unusual format for drama and this play's steady, and unbroken, need for the human ear is sometimes overwhelmingly difficult to endure.

Doug Harris speaks the most, or seems to. His narrative makes it easy to dislike him, and yet we are caught, compulsively listening, as he unfolds his personal history, his needs and his deeds equally astounding and disgusting us. Piper Patterson as his wife and the mother of his child (with another on the way) is petulant and peevisish, coming from a typical unpleasant family, though second in thoughtlessness to her husband's inflexible mother. She is a woman who, at least six months pregnant, follows in her father's footsteps and drinks her problems down with alcohol and tears. Danielle Skraastad's Nadine is cocky, abusive and amusing in her attitudes. Why her character wants to be involved with either of the others is hard to say. The actress imbues her with a solid sense of independence which consistently fades out and in like a bad television visual. All three actors put more real life onto the small Ancram stage than might be believed possible.

This is not an easy play. It is not an optimistic play. When suicide is brought into the narrative one wonders if we will have to endure watching a life-taking moment or two or three. A very thought-provoking venture it may leave you breathless for all the wrong reasons. For the work done all must be applauded; for the play itself Emily Mann must be excoriated for dragging us through a dark night of the soul for three souls simultaneously. A pre-show bourbon or vodka is not out of the question here.

If you can handle the trauma of human wreckage, a soldier whose inner cavern is filled with destruction and misanthropic mania, the horrors of a woman bred to dislike human connection, and the passions of a misplaced cry for completion by a woman who is seemingly on top of things, then go see this play. For the overly sensitive I'd suggest a film at home cuddling on the couch. This is an adventurous play for adventurous people who are willing to risk a moment of sanity in order to learn some difficult truths about our world in 1975 and our world right now.

+ 09/30/2022 +

Still Life plays at the Ancram Opera House, 1330 County Route 7, Ancram, NY through October 9. For information and tickets call (518) 329-0114 or go to their website at: INFO@ANCRAMOPERAHOUSE.ORG