

Shakespeare & Company, Lenox, MA  
**Lunar Eclipse** by Donald Margulies; Directed by James Warwick.  
Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.

**“Really, we’re two separate people.”**

A man, in near hysterics, is confronted by his wife of many years in an open farm field where he has buried his pet dogs. It is night and the world has darkened and he has come to watch a total lunar eclipse, something he only did once before, and we learn about it in both dialogue and in a visual coda to the seven “stages” of the play’s motif, the eclipse. They are an odd couple, not truly suited to one another and yet a perfect pair of folks with years of commonality. The play is in the dialogue and in ninety-five minutes we learn more about them than we ought to know. . . and it is worth the time.



Reed Birney as George, Karen Allen as Em; Photo: Maggie Hall

The man, a farmer named George, is played in the Shakespeare & Company world premiere performance by Reed Birney, an actor who could read the Jersey City telephone book, if such a thing still exists, and make it interesting. Donald Margulies has written this simple man as a complex human being with feelings he won’t express until he has to, with an intelligence that far outstrips his place in the world, as a husband with personal doubts about relationships and a father who does not understand how things could have gone as wrong as they did. George has waited for this night for a long time and there is nothing that can get in his way of observing and appreciating what nature has to offer him here. Not even his wife. Not even her.

George speaks lovingly of his dogs and almost equally emotionally about his daughter. It is his son whose life has brought him to the emotional place he will not explore. At the end of the play we learn how much family, and his own eventual offspring, means to him, how he hopes and anticipates his adulthood and the life he will someday lead. Earlier we learn the truth about his family and its confusing problems. This is, after all, a modern play, a drama that is mellow and that compels us, as much as it does George, to be involved in the realities that keep him going.



Reed Birney; Photo: Maggie Hall



Karen Allen; Photo: Maggie Hall

His wife, Em, is played by Karen Allen. She is very expressive, which suits her character who seems to want to explore and experience everything George feels whether he want her to or not. She is as intrusive on his quiet space as she can possibly be and though we want to like her for her enthusiasm in sharing his joy, it is hard to do so for a long while. It isn't until we see how much this particular night means to her as well that we can sit back and feel glad to have her with us. Allen

plays this emotional mismatch beautifully. The playwright has given her very peculiar things to say at times but each time he does, Allen manages to make feel what she is feeling and to sympathize with her loving enthusiasm. She makes George's indifference read as a peculiar way of expressing love and it gives a lengthy play a rationale for its seven "stages."

Director James Warwick brings these two actors, and their characters, together in simple ways which gives the play a reality unlike anything we might anticipate. This is the sort of theater in which we truly feel as though we are flies on a wall (that doesn't exist in this setting) witnessing a private encounter to which we have not been invited. He brings to quietly vivid life Margulies' characters. These two have much to share, much to discuss, much to learn from one another. Four talented people have given birth, here, to a world we wouldn't know about if not for this production. Opening night (or afternoon) the play was performed before a sold-out house and the audience was treated to something rare and wonderful and showed appreciation in both laughter and applause. There were no real tears in this experience but there was a definite sense of living through tragedies in order to embrace miracles.

Warwick and company are working under the design talents of James McNamara's fine lighting design which grants us the full lunar eclipse. George describes what he sees and through

the design work we see it too, although we never get a glimpse of the moon. John Musall's scenic design is simple and straightforward and a farm field emerges before our eyes. The costumes designed by Christina Beam are clothes and they are just right for these two country folk. Nathan Leigh's non-stop sound design creates a country night that goes on for hours. It is the fine work of Hope Rose Kelly, the stage manager that keeps the show moving with an exactitude that is extraordinary.

The Coda to the play, as seen below, enlightens us and almost frightens us for we know already where things are going in this play. The sweetness in Margulies' writing here is almost annoying for his earlier scenes have been difficult at times; yet here is the promise of loveliness and loving and living for a future of happiness and caring. The play ends with the hopes of two people who almost keep their promises, almost manage to live their dreams out fully. It is the hope that a lunar eclipse can provide a happy ending for Em and George. I left the theatre hoping somehow it would.



Reed Birney, Karen Allen; Photo: Maggie Hall

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**Lunar Eclipse** plays on the Elayne P. Bernstein Stage at Shakespeare & Company, 70 Kemble Street, Lenox, Massachusetts through October 22. For information and tickets go to [Shakespeare.org](http://Shakespeare.org) or call 413-637-3353.