





The Turtle Tatoo

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nytheatre.com review

Fred Backus · Jul 21, 2006

Jonathan Wallace's *The Turtle Tatoo* is about an EMS worker named Spike who spends his Tuesdays as a volunteer on the beach at the Jamaica Bay Wildlife Preserve. It is there—as part of a research project being managed by a graduate student named Jillian—that Spike finds the most fulfillment in his life, helping to protect the eggs of the nesting terrapin turtles from the predations of the local raccoons. Waging an unsuccessful battle against the forces of death at his job, Spike is dismayed to find that death—and the raccoons—seem to have the upper hand here too. Making matters worse for him is the fact that he seems to live a twilight existence between sleeping and waking, which brings on troubling hallucinations in the form of two enigmatic characters named Blue and Red. These manifestations haunt Spike's time on the beach by mercilessly forcing him to revisit the horrors of his job, the failures of his love life, and the memories of his troubled childhood, all the while taunting him with visions of dead turtles and crushed and eaten turtle eggs.

The Turtle Tatoo is an evocative array of scenes and interludes between Spike and Jillian and Blue and Red, where the distinctions between reality and fantasy, and the present and the past, are often and purposefully blurred as Spike drifts from consciousness to sleep and back out again. The play presents a rich and often engrossing—though also often confusing—world that is brimming with interesting characters and creative ideas.

Unfortunately, this inaugural production of *The Turtle Tatoo*—presented by Wallace's own Howling Moon Cab Company under the direction of Shannon Fillion—is clumsily staged with little imagination and almost no sense of pace or momentum, and any sort of artistic conception that might illuminate the characters and relationships is all but missing. Instead, the show plods through most of its potentially moving scenes and encounters without building or exploring the theatrical moments that might make them convincing.

Nor do many of the character choices that are made here seem to help matters. V. Orion Delwaterman as Spike confronts virtually every moment in the play with a heavy-handed demonstration of earnestness that doesn't leave much room to really explore the character with any sort of complexity. Elisa Abatsis's Jillian comes off as appropriately abrasive, but perhaps a little too shallow, and we don't get enough of what might lurk beneath this surface that

Author

Jonathan Wallace

Director

Shannon Fillion

Producer

Howling Moon Cab Company at the Midtown International Theatre Festival

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might make the relationship that develops between the two seem believable. Julio C. Peña as Blue brings a charismatic presence to the stage, but he never evokes the spirit of malicious menace that the part seems to call for, and there is little differentiation between the many supporting characters he also has to portray. Samantha Payne Garland fares the best as Red, presenting her various manifestations with a simple and refreshing clarity.

In the end, *The Turtle Tattoo* feels like it misses its mark—which is a shame, because in spite of its problems, Wallace's script is interesting and original, and has the potential to be a compelling and unique theatrical work. To fulfill the potential better, Wallace can probably do more to tighten up his script, but what the show needs even more is a stronger, clearer, and more imaginative production.

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This page updated Tuesday, March 18, 2008 2:48 PM

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