

Arrival of the Fittest

The BHTC's Departures and Arrivals is an engaging, intelligent spectacle

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by Daniela Smith-Fernández

Departures and Arrivals, the opening play of The Black Hole Theatre Company's 2009-10 season, is one production where you get a lot of play for the price of admission. With 22 separate scenes unified essentially only by being situated in an airport, this play could have easily fallen into fragments. Instead, every aspect was so well considered that it felt like you got deep insights from, versus unsatisfying excerpts of, many stories. It was delightful to jump from watching melodramatic scenes with frenzied vaudeville energy to more subdued moments in which characters were deeply moving, sometimes sad and always painfully human. The decision to make use of such a wide emotional palette is to be commended; not only is it gutsy, but it also results in an engaging performance.

So many different characters meant that each actor had plenty of room to show off their skills by embodying different personas. However, this also engendered my main criticism of the production. Indeed, in more than a few scenes, it felt like the characters weren't differentiated enough from one another. A lesser criticism was the scene "A Father's Advice," which was disappointing because it lacked the nuances that added interest to the rest of the play, even though they might not have stuck out so much in an inferior version.

Minor issues aside, this play still has a lot going for it. For instance, the performances — a couple of standouts would have to be Kevin Ramberran and Megan Peters, largely because they played each of their roles differently, and well. One scene, in which Ramberran was on the phone to his mother, was so effective I could feel the audience empathizing silently with him.

The greatest strength of the show is how coherently everything worked together. The BHTC made every aspect of the physical theatre space — from the weird columns to the awful carpeting — an integral character in the show. The minimalist but effective costume changes and signage worked perfectly to capture the impersonal environment of an airport; this contrasted beautifully with the intimate and quirky observations contained in the script. When it came down to the transitional scenes, continuing characters or motifs, the cast and crew did a uniformly excellent job in maintaining continuity. You really felt that the airline personnel had all been trained through the same HR manual.

Carol Shields' much-celebrated script already contains a strong reflexive element — even the awful noisy audience this reviewer was amongst became part of the spectacle. This also worked beautifully through touches like making use of both theatre entrances. In fact, I almost feel like I'd be disappointed seeing this play performed elsewhere because it so perfectly coordinated to this time and this place. In all, this is a singularly intelligent, moving and interesting production completely worth seeing.

Departures and Arrivals runs until Nov. 28 at The Black Hole Theatre on campus.