

new Theater corps

Thursday, August 06, 2009
Couples Counseling

Woody Allen meets postmodern feminism in this rousing tale of a feuding couple who can't communicate and the hired therapist who lets his personal emotions get in the way of a professional diagnosis.

Reviewed by Amanda Halkiotis



Carey Lovelace tries to keep the setting of *Couples Counseling* as anonymous and universal as possible, but the snarky dialogue and sharp body language leave no doubt that this love story takes place in New York. Still, she leaves plenty to the imagination, both for the actors (who can interpret things playfully or more maturely) and for the audience (which gets to pick a side as they piece this couple's history together). Lovelace's unique dialogue helps, for her writing is objective, and refuses to assign blame: its barked curses are followed by heavy beats, its sentences go unfinished out of frustration, and its apologies are always strained. These are just two flawed lovers who want to stay together...or at least think they do.

Played to perfection by actors James Kennedy and Anna Margaret Hollyman, there's no question that this insecure, vulnerable, blubbing guy and his gorgeous, overconfident alpha girlfriend need counseling. The two keep things light even when things get heated, generating that rare form of multidimensional stage chemistry. When in session they shout curt responses without making eye contact and dredge up the past with such intentional cruelty and personal disclosure that no matter how mortifying, the audience's eyes remain glued to the stage. A scene later, their soft, cooing voices and warm shoulder rubs or knee squeezes represent that glowing honeymoon phase right after making up. These characters are quirky, relatable, and real, and given an exceptional edge due to Lovelace's writing and the actors' dead-on portrayals.

Hollyman's character is meant to be insatiable, sexy, beguiling, and blonde: it helps that the actress is all four. She can be tender and open, but signs of weakness or indecisiveness infuriate her, swiftly shifting her back to a more sophisticated, independent self: it keeps her boyfriend, her therapist, and the audience on their toes. Lovelace has written a terrifically opinionated id, and Hollyman has captured it. From what she wants in bed to why she cheats to how her parents have shaped her worldview on relationships, she embraces her human flaws and lofty fantasies during each session, even if she never can change and her relationship can't ever be salvaged.



Somehow, Kennedy matches this high-powered performance, despite his character being the "lesser half," a slightly manipulative and deeply troubled guy. His codependence expands beyond the relationship, as he also develops a constant need for his therapist, Dr. Bob Melmud (the delightfully clueless Jack Gilpin). Hilarity and tragedy follows as Hollyman's character decides she also needs some extra "therapy." At first flattered and then coyly resistant, Dr. Bob finally relents to his patient's advances, but at the cost of a chronic nervous state and mounting ethical dilemma. Gilpin brings to the role the genuine insecurity of a man involved with a woman much younger and more attractive, conjuring such great performances as James Mason's Professor Humbert (in Stanley Kubrick's *Lolita*).

Couples Counseling's obtuse love triangle guarantees a play full of hilarious spins and tragic detours, minor idiosyncrasies and major indiscretions, all of which can all too easily be recognized by any New Yorker who has ever been—or currently is—in love.

Posted by Amanda Halkiotis at 8/06/2009 05:26:00 PM

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