

Theater Review

Provocatively Titled WHAT Show Has Substance To Back Up Shock

Chronicle

by Ellen Petry Whalen

A play's title can be many things: suggestive, engaging, nondescript, enticing, or possibly offensive. Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater's current headliner embodies all of these descriptions in one single word — "Cock."

The young British playwright Mike Bartlett's attention-grabbing, monosyllabic title came to him while in Mexico witnessing a cock fight. The 2009 play won a Laurence Olivier Award. A highly regarded and prolific dramatist, Bartlett's latest show, "King Charles III," was nominated for this year's Tony Award for best play.

"Cock's" main character, John, is in a state of crisis. He has inadvertently become part of a love triangle with a twist. After walking away from a long-term relationship with his domineering and sarcastic boyfriend, named only "M," the indecisive John finds himself falling for a woman for the first time (aptly named "W" and played by Madeleine Lambert). Slowly realizing he does not know who he is or what he wants, he waffles between the two relationships. Both lovers want John to make a choice. A tension-filled dinner party is arranged to straighten out the love triangle. For moral support, "M" has invited his confrontational father "F" to join them, throwing another cock in the already crowded ring.

Small of stature, Nicholas Carter is the heart of the play, as the malleable and nervous John. Even though he often appears to be more of an observer than a fighter in the ring, his curly, gelled-up, strawberryblonde hair conjures up the image of a rooster's red comb. As "M," Lee Seymour literally looks down on him, being a head taller, but Carter is capable of putting "M" in his place, when his character John is pushed to his limits.

Besides the brilliant and barbed dialogue (which the actors execute with spot-on British accents), what makes the modern, tension-filled play most memorable is its deconstruction. Director Jeffrey George has kept the action to a bare minimum with facial expressions and gesticulations sharing the spotlight with the edgy and often rapid-fire dialogue. The limited action is most intriguing during the few sex scenes, especially when John is exploring "W's" body for the first time. With complete ease, both Carter and Lambert face the audience, a few feet apart and fully clothed. They verbally hint at their sexual actions as if in bed together, and the sparse dialogue and verbal intonations are more than enough to fuel one's imagination.

As the show's only female, Lambert plays "W" with a confident sexuality and decisiveness. She is by no means limited by her femininity when facing all the male bravado at dinner.

Last seen starring in "Moby-Dick" at WHAT in 2015, Seymour is unwavering as the belittling "M," always ready with a sharp, verbal peck. He is happy holding the reins in the long-term relationship

and does not embrace the change John is considering.

As the father, Christopher Chisholm is unapologetic about his attack on “W,” and does not back down, even when she accuses him of ogling her feminine curves. He is protecting his family, and his paternal instincts are on full alert.

Maintaining the minimalistic theme, there are no props or furniture on the stage. Designed by Christopher Ostrom, the high-walled semicircle backdrop of rusted corrugated metal frame is suggestive of a crude cockfighting ring, and the audience looks down on the action. Adding to this imagery, the stage floor has a large gravel-filled circle laid out, where the actors posture and size each other up. Nathan Leigh’s abrupt and mildly disturbing sound design frames the snap shots of short high-intensity scenes.

Ultimately, any play, even one with a titillating title, has to stand on its own once the actors step on stage. “Cock” does not hold back any punches. Through its contemporary approach, simultaneously raw and intimate language, bare arena-like staging, and compelling acting, “Cock” comes out a winner in WHAT’s dramatic ring. **DETAILS: “Cock” At Wellfleet Harbor Actors Theater Through July 10 Information and reservations 508-349-9428**

