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Theater review: 'The Heiress'

'The Heiress' at IU: Yes, it's gorgeous, but much more, too

By Connie Shakalis H-T Reviewer Sep 22, 2018



IU Department of Theatre, Drama & Contemporary Dance: Providing training to the theater and dance professionals of tomorrow through coursework and hands-on stage experience.

"The Indiana University Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance welcomes you to campus and to Bloomington! Join us for our captivating bicentennial season of timely and provocative plays, reimagined classics, innovative choreographic works and our annual festival of brand new plays." — *Madison Colquette, dramaturg*

Coming up: "By the Bog of Cats" (Sept. 27-Oct. 5 at IU's Wells-Metz Theatre, 275 S. Jordan Ave.)

I had heard that some students were dragging their feet about seeing Indiana University's production of "The Heiress," assuming it to be another long play about 19th century rich people whining about their domestic dilemmas while nibbling petit fours: people all dressed up to sit around all day to do nothing.

Those students might be surprised, should they see director Dale McFadden's final play for IU's department of theatre, drama, and contemporary dance.

Three hours was not a minute too long Friday night for this majestically staged and costumed tale of family dynamics, disappointment and revenge served up chilled and mouth-watering.

Ruth and Augustus Goetz's play hit Broadway in 1947; they had based it on Henry James' short novel "Washington Square." The endings of the novel and play differ, and I won't spoil the play's Act II except to say it is luscious.

As the act closes, Glynnis Kunkel-Ruiz as the main character, Catherine Sloper, gives new meaning to stair climbing. Qi'er Luo (lighting designer) provides her with a double-light crown of sorts, which not only lights the staircase but indicates Catherine's — finally — revelation.

Kunkel-Ruiz is so good in this role. Among her best moments are her facial expressions as she stares into the fourth wall (that imaginary boundary existing between performers and the audience). McFadden gave her plenty of time to tell us, without a word, what she thought. Chilling. She astonished in her array of magnificent gowns (Jason Orlenko, costume designer). Orlenko often chose to have Catherine blend in with Chris Mueller's (scenic designer) carmine-red (and baby blue) set, which, in itself, gives us significant clues about Catherine's character. Early in the play she claims, "We shall not fight," referring to her repugnance for domestic quarreling, but Catherine Sloper is a warrior.

Oh, yes, Catherine blends in, until she doesn't!

Daniel Meeks as her opinionated, controlling father is new to the IU stage, and I suspect and hope he will return numerous times. Does he love his only child, an awkward daughter who "killed her mother" during childbirth? Is he protecting his wealth — or his socially awkward child's future happiness? We won't know till the end, but Meeks draws us into Dr. Sloper's personality so well that I even feared he really was coming down with an awful cold as he coughed and sputtered into his stethoscope.

Felix Merback's Morris Townsend, Catherine's hunky suitor, is another treat. The play's Morris seems to be a little different from the Morris in James' novel. Or, maybe it is McFadden's direction; we were not left with much confusion (no spoilers!) about this Morris' intentions. Does he want Catherine's person — or purse? His sister (Athena Kopulos) tells Dr. Sloper he's not evil just irreversibly self-centered, or as one might say today, narcissistic.

But Dr. Sloper and Morris are not totally dissimilar. The saying goes that we dislike in others the flaws we see in ourselves. They both are enchanted by "pretty things" and luxurious living. Morris once bought "two pieces of Venetian glass" just because, even though he couldn't afford them. "I love fine things, always have."

Kopulos as his widowed and burdened sister relays some of the play's wisest philosophy as she reiterates to Dr. Sloper the fact that no one ever, ever knows what another is thinking. Her wisdom shines again as she tells the doctor, "You expect too much." Another old saying goes like this: Every big disappointment we have happens because someone failed to meet our expectations. She may even be the play's wisest character, as she tactfully, carefully encourages Dr. Sloper to accept the marriage of her brother and Catherine. After all, she would then be rid of her brother, who has freeloaded in her home for the past 16 years.

Supposedly Henry James could not bring himself to reread his novel; maybe it veered too near to events he had personally witnessed. I had a close friend in New York who never married and stayed home with her neurosurgeon father who, like Dr. Sloper, disapproved of her fiance, who at last faded from the picture. These stories come from our lives.

"You embroider neatly," are the only complimentary words Dr. Sloper can give Catherine as they argue over her imminent marriage to Morris. And does she ever. As she stops the play's action to finish her neat fancy-work, I felt something big was about to happen.

It did.

If you go

WHO: Indiana University Department of Theatre, Drama, and Contemporary Dance.

WHAT: "The Heiress" by Ruth and Augustus Goetz.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. Sept. 25-29; also 2 p.m. Sept. 29.

WHERE: Ruth N. Halls Theater, 275 N. Jordan Ave.

TICKETS: \$10-\$20. Call 812.855.1103 or visit theatre.indiana.edu.

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