

Seascape, by Edward Albee - Review

Canterbury Repertory Theatre

Elmwood Auditorium, 15 November 2023

Reviewed by Phoebe Biddle for Backstage Christchurch - Theatre Reviews

A couple in the winter years of their life sit idly on a beach. They've been through and survived all the things that you might associate with a good life. Youth and the school years, courting each other, having children and raising them, having grandchildren and helping raise them too, and now... now they're not sure what to do next. Charlie is quite happy to snooze on the beach, relax in the sun with a cold drink and a picnic. "We've earned a little rest," he says. Nancy, on the other hand, isn't ready to stop. They've done everything they're supposed to in life and for what? For who? Their kids are grown now, long since flown the nest. It's their time to do whatever they want! "We've earned a little LIFE," she implores.

The play revolves around this disparity. One wants to stop and breathe for a minute while the other is ready to get going, to traverse beach to beach for the rest of their lives! "What do you want to do?" Charlie asks. The short answer, really, is that neither of them know. They're in the latter years of life, retired, vacationing, and bored. What is their purpose now that they don't have children to raise or other people to serve, including, it seems, each other? Their conversations are poignant, discussing everything from birth to death and all that's in between. Sex and sexuality - the lack of it as they've aged. Fantasies they've had about each other and other lovers. Worries they share about death and dying - a constant reminder that they are getting closer to shuffling off this mortal coil is present through the whole production. Liver paste sandwiches... no subject is missed!

They've each had a good life, but "why does it have to be *had*? Why not *have*?" asks Nancy, and it's true. They've fulfilled the supposed meaning of life - the living, learning, loving and laughing. Now what? Can they not keep doing that in their golden years? They're the top of the pyramid from which everything is born, not the bottom holding everything up. Nancy yearns for Charlie to remember this. And what does it take for that to happen? A rather odd encounter with two talking lizards....

Yes, you read that right!

I am slightly glad I had forewarning that there would be lizards involved in this show. The production itself kept this element under wraps and I do see why! The shock value that it adds for an audience member with no clue is hilarious, and I believe this happened as I was watching. The guffaws from the crowd as the lizards, Leslie and Sarah, poke their heads up from behind the scenes was genuine and contagious. As the reviewer, it was quite nice to know what was coming, though, having said that, I still wasn't entirely prepared!

With our human couple and our lizard couple tangled in an "are-they-friendly, are-they-not" stand off, the real depth of the production begins to show. These seafaring lizards, though English-speaking, are not human and cannot fathom what it is to be human. Even Nancy and Charlie struggle to explain it. How do you explain what love is to someone with no idea of the concept? How do you tell someone how something feels? It comes so easy to us, all this humanity. Compassion. Empathy. And, of course, love.

Embracing the weirdness: that's exactly what this production does! It's a fantastically human achievement to take the weird and find the normality, sweetness, and wholesomeness inside it. Two scared lizards are what it takes to show two bored humans that, actually, they have had a great life, and they can still have one too.

Seascape is phenomenal. Gripping and entertaining, poignant and humorous, deep and lighthearted all at the same time. A four-person cast holds the stage, and a 90-minute play feels like it passes in the blink of an eye. The acting is mesmerizing, reminiscent of 50's style film with the camp dramatic vibe - completely necessary in such a small production but not easy to pull off! Effortless comedy pours from the mouths of the actors. Annette Thomson, Michael Adams, Charles Grubb, and Annabelle Tomlinson absolutely earn their proper due. I was transported in time, lost in memory, both mine and the characters on the stage. The stage itself, the set and scenery, costumes, makeup - man, the makeup! - and lighting all came together to make this a spectacle that shouldn't be missed. A fantastic crew, including phenomenal director Eilish Moran, deserve their credit, and, of course, the writer, Edward Albee, without whom we wouldn't have this play in the first place. I will be reeling for quite some time after seeing this, in only the best ways. I thoroughly, thoroughly enjoyed it.

I seriously encourage anyone who hasn't got a ticket to get one! Give this production the crowd it deserves, and go and see it. It's well worth the watch!