



ALL IN THE DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY: (left to right) Michele Pawk, Celia Keenan-Bolger, Reed Birney in Adam Bock's *A Small Fire*. Photo: Joan Marcus

Theater Review

Ambitious *A Small Fire* fails to ignite

into a cohesive dramatic blaze; evokes more apathy than sympathy

A Small Fire

Written by Adam Bock

Directed by Trip Cullman

Through January 23, 2011

Playwrights Horizons Theatre

416 West 42nd Street

(212-279-4200), www.playwrightshorizons.org



By David NouNou

Adam Bock's title *A Small Fire* starts out literally being a small fire but proceeds into a figurative blazing, devastating inferno that destroys everything in its path. This is not the antidote that chases away the January post-holiday blues. There is a lot of serious stuff going on here, but it is not all cohesive or well organized. At times, it is compelling but more often than not, the situations seem contrived. The play is set up as scenes, thus deeming itself incomplete and unsatisfying. Even the scenes that are supposed to be plot twists in the play end up seeming trite and banal rather than enriching the content.

The biggest problem with the play is that the leading character is not a particularly likeable person, and everything that befalls her evokes little sympathy. In the first scene, we meet workaholic, abrasive and bombastic Connecticut contractor, Emily Bridges, (Michele Pawk), on a job site discussing personnel with her foreman, Billy (Victor Williams). In scene two, she is in her living room having coffee with her husband John (Reed Birney) and discussing her daughter Jenny's (Celia Keenan-Bolger) upcoming marriage to the man Emily berates and feels is not good enough for her daughter. It is in this scene that a small fire begins in the kitchen and Emily cannot detect it, indicating she has lost her sense of smell.

In scene three, we meet Jenny talking about seating arrangements with her father and discussing the typical mother/daughter fine line problems. Emily gets worse after losing her sense of smell; she loses her sense of taste, and then sight, and all this happens before her daughter's nuptials. What adds to the frustration here is we do not really know what ails Emily. What debilitating disease has claimed Emily as a victim, precipitating all these sense losses? It is never made clear.

Michele Pawk, an accomplished actress, is in the demanding but thankless role of Emily. She comes off best in her silent distressed moments when she is not berating

people or brow beating her family. Reed Birney is stalwart as the loving and caring husband. He is both noble and valiant. Celia Keenan-Bolger as the daughter, and Victor Williams as Emily's devoted foreman and friend, add dimension to their characters. The play is handsomely framed in Loy Arcenas' set.

Yes, a lot of stuff is going on here, but not all is necessarily needed. Trip Cullman's direction is fine if not necessarily wise. A stronger vision was needed to make this drama more satisfying, and compelling. It is a shame leaving the theater apathetic rather than sympathetic after seeing such powerful material.

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