



ALL IN THE DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY: (left to right) Keith Nobbs, Kevin Kilner, Kellie Overbey in Lanford Wilson's *Lemon Sky*. Photo: Richard Termine

Theater Review

Family ties bind & unravel in

revival of Lanford Wilson's disturbing *Lemon Sky*



LEMON SKY

By Lanford Wilson

Directed by Jonathan Silverman

Through October 22, 2011

The Clurman Theatre at Theatre Row

410 West 42nd Street

(212-239-6200), <http://www.keencompany.org/>

By Scott Harrah

This revival of the late Lanford Wilson's 1970 Off-Broadway drama is often intense and, at least in the first act, compelling and thoroughly engrossing. This story of 17-year-old Alan (Keith Nobbs, recently seen on Broadway in *Lombardi*), a teen that leaves his native Nebraska and heads to California to live with his father Douglas (Kevin Kilner), stepmother Ronnie (Kellie Overbey, and siblings and foster kids in suburban San Diego), begins as a lighthearted story of a teenager reuniting with the father who walked out on him and his mother at age five. However, the levity does not last long. The play starts out like a happy tale of a boy seeking his father's approval and a new life in a warm climate, but the newfound family ties begin to unravel as Alan realizes his father, two baby brothers (ages eight and 12), the foster kids and stepmother all have copious baggage—and dark secrets.

Stories about family dysfunction are, in the 21st century, rather old hat, but four decades ago it is easy to see why *Lemon Sky* appeared daring and shocking. The show has all the elements of classic melodrama: a son with ambiguous sexuality, an oversexed, tyrannical father, impressionable children, drug and alcohol abuse, and financial woes.

Mr. Nobbs, as Alan, is outstanding, and manages to carry this intriguing but flawed story by imbuing the character with the right mix of innocence and adolescent frustration, and that is no easy task in a saga so overloaded with turgid narrative twists. The story is supposedly set in both the 1959 and 1970 in El Cajon, California, but it is sometimes confusing about which decade we are actually seeing. Alan narrates throughout the play, speaking directly to the audience, and then turns and talks to other characters.

While this may sound like a West Coast version of something by Tennessee Williams—*The Glass*

Menagerie comes to mind— it really is not, although it is definitely a memory play. Mr. Wilson’s work is often compared to Williams, but *Lemon Sky* owes a lot to the New Journalism of 1960s Californiana. In particular, a long, poetic soliloquy in act two (originally in act three in the 1970 production) seems as if it could be lifted straight out of Joan Didion’s classic 1966 Saturday Evening Post article “Some Dreamers of The Golden Dream,” about murder, extramarital affairs and drug abuse, set in the arid, suburban hills of inland Southern California—a subtropical Shangri-La mostly populated with middle-class Midwestern transplants, living on a fault line in homes that were constantly threatened by wildfires caused by the Santa Ana winds. The late Mr. Wilson, like Ms. Didion, depicts the inland areas of Southern California as a mock Promised Land: sunny and beautiful on the surface, but populated with as much human strife as any inner city on the East Coast or in the austere, bleak Midwest.

Jonathan Silverman does his best to direct a play that is loaded with thematic holes, but he needs to focus things more so what is supposed to be the past and present is not so confusing. The subplots revolving around foster kids Carol, a promiscuous, pill-popping teen (Alyssa May Gold) and shy, withdrawn Penny (Amy Tedesco), allegations of pedophilia, and other sensitive subject matter sometimes come across as contrived sensationalism. Alyssa May Gold’s interpretation of Carol seems far too modern, often portraying the character as a wisecracking, neurotic Valley Girl from the 1980s. Amy Tedesco’s Penny is appropriately mousy, while Kellie Overbey’s Ronnie is a plausible combination of an outgoing suburban housewife trying to relate to the kids while maintaining a classic 1950s-style veil of secrecy and denial about her husband’s sinister side. Kevin Kilner’s Douglas, as the overbearing father, is sometimes too over-the-top and shrill, and gets so caught up in the emotional delivery of his dialogue that he flubs lines.

The final scene starts out heartbreaking and tragic, but Lanford Wilson overloads the play’s last moments with so much gloom, anguish, and grief that the end result descends into mawkish soap opera, leaving audiences ultimately unsatisfied.

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