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A Captivating *Lolita Roadtrip*

San Jose Stage Company explores engrossing tale in world premiere

By Karen D'Souza

Vladimir Nabokov chased butterflies on a cross-country drive back in 1941. In “Lolita Roadtrip,” a grad student chases the writer’s ghost as she retraces his footsteps and his foibles.

Mystery, history and the puzzle of the subconscious intertwine in Trevor Allen’s beguiling new play. The playwright best known for “The Creature” and “Tenders in the Fog” riffs on Nabokovian themes in this captivating piece in its world premiere, a joint production of San Jose Stage (where it runs through May 1) and San Francisco’s PlayGround.

Allen unleashes four voices whose stories tumble forth in a chaotic chorus of needs and desires. All of the characters speak the truth as they see it, and feel it, but none of them can be entirely trusted, so their memories each tell a different version of why they are all as haunted as Nabokov’s infamous characters. While the tragicomedy doesn’t feel quite finished as yet, this is still one mesmerizing “Roadtrip” through the dark side of the heart.

Allen writes such vivid monologues that each of his characters instantly seduce the imagination, although we only hear snatches of their tales. One speaks and then another cuts off the reverie, so that we hear each story in counterpoint to the one that came before, like a chaotic musical composition.

It’s a symphony of broken dreams that intersect on a fateful road trip. Lee Sankowich’s pitch-perfect cast captures just the right key of longing and regret. They spin through time on Giulio Cesare Perrone’s slyly rotating set, a limbo of asphalt and horizon.

There’s Chloë Bronzan as the vulnerable brainiac Stanford grad student Julia,

writing her dissertation on the life and work of the famous Russian author. There's Patrick Alparone as the flirty young hustler who talks his way into hitching a ride with her. And then there's the estimable Stacy Ross and Julian López-Morillas morphing through a menagerie of oddball characters on the serpentine journey from one coast to another.

Alparone charms as the precocious 18-year-old, too young to get a "Ghostbusters" reference but old enough to know that Julia has demons nipping at her heels. The actor nails the play's sardonic humor and milks the May/December dynamic for all its worth. Bronzan, meanwhile, taps into Julia's tenderness as well as her literary obsessive compulsiveness, but she misses the character's deep sense of pain. Her Julia seems bruised but not broken. She's far too calm and collected to be hiding a fractured soul beneath her wisecracks.

Ross delivers a tour-de-force as a series of quirky roadside eccentrics, from a stalagmite junkie in a cave to a hippie-granola aroma therapist and a UFO spotter. Her quick-witted turns give the production its zip.

López-Morillas skips back and forth primarily between the role of Nabokov, hunting his elusive butterfly, and Drake, a Stanford professor who also has a weakness for beautiful, mercurial young creatures, like Julia when she was a girl.

While the dialogue snaps and the actors spark, there is something a little predictable about Julia's back story, which we hear in fits and starts as the play goes on, that keeps the finale from cutting as deeply as it wants to. Similarly, the relationship between Drake and his dying, bedridden wife (a very moving Ross) doesn't reveal enough about what, if anything, torments Drake about his past. His motivations remain in shadow, so that the play's climactic scenes don't seem to flow from what has gone before.

However, Allen writes with such depth and sensitivity that it's clear he can connect all the strands here, given enough time. The playwright beautifully captures the vertigo of burning with love in a chilly universe.

Perhaps the most poignant passages here revolve around the life cycle of the butterfly. He describes ethereal creatures taking wing on a doomed flight. They undergo a revelatory transformation only to have their bodies quickly give out against the stresses of existence.

Allen intends them as a metaphor for his characters, all of whom struggle toward a metamorphoses, but these lovely odes to the butterfly world shimmer brighter than some of the human exchanges. However, the chorus of voices is compelling enough that if Allen can sharpen the narrative as the play evolves, there's no doubt this "Lolita" can soar high indeed.

"Lolita Roadtrip "
By Trevor Allen

Through: May 1

Where: San Jose Stage Company, 490 S. First St.

Running Time: 2 hours, 25 minutes (one intermission)

Tickets: \$20-\$45;

408-283-7142;

www.thestage.org