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REVIEWWhen We Were Young and UnafraidStarring Cherry Jones

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 16th, 2014

In Treatment and *House of Cards* Scribe Delivers On the NYC Stage

Playwright, Sarah Treem

The title of Sarah Treem's new play *When We Were Young and Unafraid* is ironic. The young characters are the most fearful while the oldest one tempers her actions with caution based on scary previous experiences. Set at the height of the Women's Liberation Movement in the early 1970s, Treem's insightful work examines the damaging effect of gender stereotyping on different generations, and how those assigned roles force everyone, but especially women, to hide their true identities.

Even the setting serves a hidden agenda. We're in the homey kitchen of a bed and breakfast on an island off the coast of Seattle (designed with attention to domestic detail by Scott Pask.) The owner, a no-nonsense former nurse named Agnes (the magnificent Cherry Jones), does not allow guests here. That's not just for reasons of privacy or professionalism. The inn also serves as a safe house for women escaping spousal abuse in an era before such establishments were commonplace or respectable and the kitchen is the refugees' entry point. One particular runaway, Mary Anne, a young Army bride (the subtle Zoe Kazan), and Hannah, a traveling African-American would-be revolutionary (the fiery Cherise Boothe) throw the house into disorder and upset Agnes' delicate relationship with her 16-year-old daughter Penny (a brittle Morgan Saylor), a brainy girl who wants to attract boys and fit in with her classmates. There's also Paul (a complex and pathetic Patch Darragh), a wimpy tourist licking his wounds from a recent divorce and seeking to escape the confusing sexual revolution taking over his home city of San Francisco.

Cherry Jones, Morgan Saylor and Zoe Kazan. Photo: Joan Marcus

Treem, whose credits include HBO's *In Treatment and Netflix's House of Cards*, tends to indulge in some TV-style melodramatics, such as having Hannah break in through the window when she has no reason to do so and endowing too many characters with deep, dark secrets revealed at exactly the right moment. But her observations are strong and her portraiture is honest. Under the sensitive direction of Pam MacKinnon, the cast paints in all the various shades of grey in these people whose attitudes are anything but black and white.

As she did in the recent revival of *The Glass Menagerie*, Jones handily avoids the trap of making a protective mother a smothering monster. Nor is her Agnes a plaster saint. She can be flinty and harsh as well as compassionate. A closeted lesbian and abortion provider, Agnes has been through the sexual wars. Jones doesn't display her battle scars, but you know they are there. Saylor, best known for her role on Showtime's *Homeland*, makes an impressive stage debut, charting Penny's rocky road through adolescence. Kazan again proves she's one of our most intense performers, endowing Mary Anne with both street smarts and dangerous naïveté. Like Stella Kowalski in *Streetcar*, she has spirit and intelligence, but she is still drawn to an abusive husband. Darragh and Boothe also find the conflicting emotions in their multi-dimensional roles in this finely-tuned work displaying how the roles of women and men have changed and stayed the same.

At one point Hannah informs Agnes the Supreme Court has decided in favor of abortion rights in the Roe v. Wade case and that things are changing. "Yes, but they'll change back," Agnes replies. It's a chilling moment in an evening full of them.

When We Were Young and Unafraid ****1/2*
Manhattan Theatre Club at NY City Center Stage I, 131 W. 55th St., NYC. Tue., Wed., Sun., 7 p.m.; Thu.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. $89. (212) 581-1212 or www.nycitycenter.org.
Now-Aug. 10.

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