

new leaf



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*Girl in Hyacinth Blue by Susan Vreeland
Adapted and Directed by Morgan Leavitt*

REVIEWS

Chicago Sun-Times, April 19, 2004

RECOMMENDED

Anyone who has stood in Amsterdam's Rijksmuseum before a wall of original paintings by Dutch master Johannes Vermeer knows the powerful draw of his quiet portraits of women. Done in rich, vibrant hues and colors you never thought imaginable, they capture straightforward moments in time that spark the imagination.

And now the tiny New Leaf Theatre has taken on the daunting task of presenting a world premiere stage adaptation. In eight elegant chapters, Vreeland traced a painting's provenance through the centuries and showed how it affected the life of each owner. However, in the stage version, adapter and director Morgan Leavitt has chosen to concentrate on only five segments of the book - three of the painting's owners and the final chapters that go back to Vermeer, a frustrated father of 11 struggling with debt, as he paints the picture, and the bittersweet awakening of his eldest daughter, Magdalena, who sits for the portrait.

As in the book, Leavitt uses a quick introduction to set up the modern-day ownership of the painting, which depicts a young girl sitting at a window, sewing. All the evidence - technique, color, subject matter - points to it being a Vermeer. But its owner, math teacher Cornelius Engelbrecht, lacks the documentation to prove the painting's heritage. His obsession and frustration with the haunted work sets off a tour through the past as we learn that Engelbrecht's Nazi father stole it in 1940 from a doomed Jewish family in Amsterdam.

Time then shifts to Holland's great flood of 1717, when a poor farm family has been forced into living on the upper floors of their house. One day a boat floats up to the house; in it are a baby and the painting. "Sell the painting. Feed the child," says a note. But Saskia has fallen in love with the painting, calling it Morningshine. She fights her husband's wishes to sell it, declaring that there must be beauty in life, too.

This is the play's strongest segment, featuring a vibrant, piercing performance by Anne-Marie Welty as Saskia, a desperate woman whose perception of life and art has been forever changed by her encounter with the painting. Throughout the play's first half, observing and helping with the narration is Magdalena - Ryan Driscoll in a nicely layered performance.

In the play's second half, she comes front and center as Vermeer struggles with his creative muse while being battered by family matters and the judgmental gaze of his wealthy mother-in-law. After Vermeer's death, the picture, like many others, is sold to redeem a family debt. Years later a grown Magdalena encounters her portrait at an auction and tries to win it back. She fails but is forever changed by the luminous, power and reflective beauty of art.

Extracting passages straight from Vreeland's novel, Leavitt uses a dramatic narrative that has a nice storytelling effect that does not diminish the thoughtful quality of the writing. With a small budget and virtually no props, the actors wander the stage quoting passages and morphing into Vreeland's sharply etched characters. The cast, mostly young actors just starting out, handles the majority of the material with ease.

- Mary Houlihan

Bill Hyland -
Executive Director
Brandon Ray -
Artistic Director
Morgan Leavitt -
Artistic Associate
Tanya Ray -
Managing Director
Lisa Hyland -
Board President

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Chicago Reader, April 22, 2004

Writer-director Morgan Leavitt's powerful adaptation of Susan Vreeland's luminous novel traces the history of a Vermeer painting as it travels from owner to owner, a story told mostly through melancholy interior monologues. The play moves backward in time, beginning in the present with Cornelius Jack Rucker, a loner who keeps the painting hidden in his study, and ending with Vermeer Brandon Ray. Compelled to paint though his children are starving, he captures on canvas the rich inner life of his daughter Magdalena Ryan Driscoll.

In Leavitt's version Magdalena wanders through all three stories though there are six owners in the book, which gives the play a sense of continuity. At the same time, *Girl in Hyacinth Blue* gently but provocatively details the very different ways people experience art. Some identify so strongly with the subject that they can't bear to part with the painting: in 1717 Saskia a vibrant Anne-Marie Welty tries to hold onto it instead of selling it to buy the food her family desperately needs. Others, like Cornelius, value it solely for its physical beauty, its extraordinary technique. In the end, however, every story suggests that people are more important than objects, no matter how gorgeous.

- Jennifer Vanasco

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