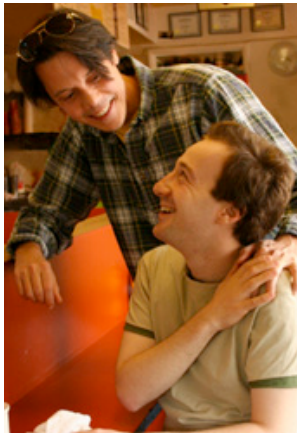




Summerland Feels Like Comin' Home

By Drew VanDyche

Published: May 4, 2006



Zac Jaffee and Ron Rittinger
AlterTheater's West Coast
premiere of *Summerland*.

“We’re all waitin’ for somethin’ aren’t we?” That’s the question Aura (Patricia Silver), the long-deceased Dakota homesteading matriarch asks us during the opening scene of *Summerland*, currently playing at the Art Works Downtown in San Rafael. And it feels like I’ve been waiting for this story to be told all of my life. With lyrical abandon, playwright Brian Thorstenson breathes new life into this sweet and poignant coming-out/coming-of-age story, showing us that there are always more depths to be mined in the genre, and there is always more precious soil within which to play and dig. Told in the round, or more aptly put, the rectangle, Director Ken Sonkin and playwright Brian Thorstenson assemble one of the finest examples of ensemble casting seen to date, and there is not a moment of in-authenticity in their performances. And one cannot speak about this play without mentioning the superb artistry of Sound Designer Norman Kern. If you don’t leave the performance wanting to buy the soundtrack, I would be very surprised.

Bud is a sixteen year old, stuck in a small Dakota town — tormented by his repressed, same-sex desires. Desires that only find an outlet in rest stop encounters with the likes of swarthy redneck Tom. Both Bud (Zac Jaffee) and Tom (Michael Navarra) bring to life the agony of the love that dare not speak its name, but from different angles. Jaffee captures the angst of being a teenager remarkably, and he bounces off the walls with frenetic energy and the desperate plea for male (and a Father’s) affirmation. Navarra, on the other hand, burns with the hunger of an internalized homophobia, distilling it, and sending it out like bullets from his gun. (Warning: Gunshot sound effects are used during the performance.)

Bud’s mother, Doreen (Anne Darragh), is a single Mom attempting to eke out an existence as proprietress of the local diner. Gun-shy when it comes to relationships, Darragh plays Doreen superbly with all the nuances familiar to a woman in her state of mind. And her romance with trucker Sam (Marvin C. Greene) is a wondrous thing to behold. Greene makes us long for the kind of man embodied in the likes of a young Henry Ford, Robert Redford, and Paul Newman.

Jonah (Ron Rittinger) serves as a type of “gentleman caller,” or should I say “California drifter,” to the story — and I am so jealous; for every night Bud gets to fall in love with Jonah all over again, and so do we. And Patricia Silver rounds out the cast, giving a wonderfully understated performance as Aura, and fulfilling two roles with perfection — as both the visiting shade to

Doreen and the Narrator to the audience. Here is an actor who makes you want to hang on her every word.

Many times during this play, I found myself leaning forward in my seat, wiping away the tears, and laughing out loud with delight. And many times, I felt that it was my own soul being laid bare on that stage, my own past unearthed from the arid ground.

If you only see one play for the rest of your life, make it Summerland. It truly satisfies. This is the play that I wish I had written. And this is the play that will haunt me the rest of my days.

The magic of Summerland continues until May 14 at the Art Works Downtown, 1337 Fourth St. (at "D" St.), San Rafael. Tickets (\$20), call (415) 454-2787 or go to www.altertheater.org