

## Theater Review: Brown Paper Box Co. Dances 'The Baltimore Waltz'

Submitted by [PatrickMcD](#) [1] on January 29, 2017 - 11:54am

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CHICAGO – During the scourge of the AIDS epidemic, at its height in the late 1980s, a playwright lost her brother to the condition. Inspired by him, Paula Vogel wrote “The Baltimore Waltz,” a story about her and her brother’s travels through Europe – and filtered through the prism of fantasy and the movies. The Brown Paper Box Company presents a re-staging of the play in Chicago through February 19th, 2017.



Play Rating: **3.5/5.0**

Using the modern tools of storefront theater – computerized music cues, slideshow presentation and creative use of space – Brown Paper Box Company takes us on a travelogue through Europe, with a brother and sister duo, trailed by the mysterious “Third Man.” The three person cast create a passionate show of madness and mystery, having symbolically to do with the suddenness of the AIDS crisis, and how loved ones were absorbed and lost so quickly. The “waltz” in the title is the dance of life, so precise when it’s all working and so out-of-sync when the fellow revelers are plucked from that dance floor.



Paul Michael Thomson, Jenna Schoppe and Justin Harner of 'The Baltimore Waltz'

*Photo credit: BrownPaperBox.org*

Anna (Jenna Schoppe) is a grade school teacher who has a terminal disease, here called ATD (Acquired Toilet Disease). Her wacky gay



brother Carl (Paul Michael Thomson) decides to give her the gift of a European vacation, and the two fly to many locales overseas. Seemingly following them is a "Third Man" (Justin Harner), who portrays multiple roles in his task to make sure they have passage. Anna wants to bed as many men as possible, Carl carries a stuffed rabbit, and the Third Man tries to accommodate all of their needs.

The play is presented in the intimate Frontier Theatre space in Chicago's Edgewater neighborhood, and the Brown Paper Box Company uses the smaller space to expand upon the European destinations. Simple white curtains frame the various locales, and are opened to reveal hotel rooms, cafes and tourist spots along the way. Most interesting is the slideshow that reveals more about what is actually happening than what Carl wants to reveal (he shows the slides) and captures the emotion of what the play wants to communicate.

The small cast is up to being the guides in the journey, especially the "Third Man" character portrayed by Justin Harner. He has to perform a variety of characters and accents, even a couple of bed partners for Anna. There is a relish to his various interpretations, and he maintains the sense of his fantasy to the other two characters. Interestingly, the character of Carl is a background to his sister Anna, yet Paul Michael Thomson and Jenna Schoppe perform and maintain a decent chemistry to their brother/sister act.



Justin Harner as One of His Many Personas in 'The Baltimore Waltz'

Photo credit: *BrownPaperBox.org*

The book of the play is intentionally vague, to the story's detriment. Since I'm primarily a film critic, I was able to pick up the cinematic cues to many of the references that were made in the play, casual observers may have more problems. "The Third Man" is a classic suspense film made in 1949 starring Orson Welles, and the intrigue in the play mimics what the film had manufactured. There are also nods to "The Student Prince" (1954) and most sideways to "Dr. Strangelove" (1964), but some more establishment in this symbolic direction might have been helpful, since the play itself is 26 years old. The Acquired Toilet Disease is a silly and uncomfortable reference to AIDS in retrospect, it would be curious to know what audiences thought when the play was contemporary.

But this is a comedy, and what is the greatest antidote to tears than laughter? This is how playwright Paula Vogel chose to deal with her brother's passing, and Brown Paper Box Company made a expressive decision to bring back this relic from another era, seemingly so close but oh so far away.

*The Brown Paper Box Company Presents "The Baltimore Waltz" at the Frontier Theatre, 1106 W. Thorndale in Chicago, Thursday-Saturday at 7:30pm and Sundays at 2:30pm through February 19th, 2017. [Click here](#) [19] for more information, dates/times and to purchase tickets. Featuring Jenna Schoppe, Paul Michael Thomson and Justin Harner. Written by Paula Vogel. Directed by Ed Rutherford.*



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