Theater Review: Brown Paper Box Company Hosts a Monumental ‘Speech & Debate’

Submitted by PatrickMcD [1] on February 19, 2018 - 3:07pm

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CHICAGO – “Speech & Debate,” the latest production from the mighty Brown Paper Box Company, continues their tradition of thinking outside that “box” in presenting storefront theater that makes a statement and a difference. “Speech” goes inside America by showcasing the outsiders… those who create art because they can’t get it right in real life. This non-equity Chicago stage play premiere is finely tuned and wonderfully acted, and runs through March 4th, 2018. Click here [18] for more details, including ticket information.



Play Rating: **5.0/5.0**

The beauty of the piece is the dynamo of the three lead actors. Two are tentative and emerging adolescent gay men, the other is a overwrought theater nerd gal who cannot get cast. Together they create their own kind of music, and in that interim discover more about themselves than they expected. The play is sensitive, contemporary and performance strong, and becomes an absorbing piece of theater craft, with a freedom that allows the characters to expand and testify.



Diwata (Deanalis Resto) Inputs her Vlog in ‘Speech & Debate’
Photo credit: Zach Dries for Brown Paper Box Company

Howie (Trevor Bates) begins the play through a online texting episode… he is trolling for willing hook-ups, even if they are considerably older than his 18 years. A 36-year-old takes the bait, and he happens to be the drama teacher at the school the outcast attends. Enter Solomon

(Darrin Putin), a tic-filled closet case who wants to be a journalist. He has hijacked Howie’s exchange through H’s interaction with a video blog created by Diwata (Deanalis Resto), and threatens to expose Howie and the teacher to jumpstart his reporter ambitions. Diwata is perplexed by this, she just wants to get two more people to join her newly formed “Speech & Debate” club, so that it can get funded by the school. Howie and Solomon go along for the ride.

This is a complex and fulfilling interplay on identity and high school hijinks. The character of Diwata is somewhat Machiavellian. She’s fine exploiting her two gay friends as long as she gets what she wants… to be a primo actor. Howie and Solomon are doing dances of their own – Howie is out and proud, but Solomon squirms in the darkness of his closet. In the tug of war between the two, they are resolving the peculiar enlightenment that occurs when accepting the inner expression of simply being themselves. This is spectacularly brought to light by the performances of the three principals.

Deanalis Resto, as Diwata, is a ball of fire wrapped in a eggshell fragility. Her passive aggressiveness toward her two new friends is realized through her force-of-nature interpretation. Throughout the play, she cannot be ignored. Darrin Putin as Solomon is naturalistic when it comes to doubting his own energy. His denial of self is his downfall, it literally makes him sick. Trevor Bates as Howie is masterful as the cocky gay best friend, while on the inside is scared to death being a new kid in town. The three together are a dynamic that generates that elusive thing called theater.



Diwata Flies High with Howie (Trevor Bates, left) and Solomon (Darrin Putin) in ‘Speech & Debate’
Photo credit: Zach Dries for Brown Paper Box Company

What struck me so vitally was that this is a play of the now, sparked by the direction of David Lipschutz, and written with intuitive modernity by Stephen Karam… even though it opened Off-Broadway in 2007. Brown Paper Box Company has a history of finding gems in the theater of the last generation and reviving them for Chicago audiences. “Speech & Debate” is another great revelation, for it displays a culture of youth that often gets dismissed, only to emerge later as the artists who feed the masses.

The combined awkwardness and aggressive confidence of the characters is such a coming out, not so much of sexual identity but those tentative steps toward adulthood… that time where it feels like you want to do something great, but have no idea how to go about it. And sometimes, just sometimes, it can feel right if you have the ready and willing fellow travelers.

Brown Paper Box Company presents “Speech & Debate,” Thursday-Sunday (with additions, click the link in the first paragraph) @ 7:30pm through March 4th, 2018, at The Edge Theater, 5451 North Broadway, Chicago. Featuring Trevor Bates, Elise Marie Davis, Darrin Putin and Deanalis Resto. Written by Stephen Karam. Directed by David Lipschultz. For more information about Brown Paper Box Co., Click here *[19]*

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