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River runs, cast stuns as UA Theatre premieres “The River”

Kyle Ashley, Staff Writer

This week, the UA Department of Theatre and Dance hosts “The River.” Set in a cabin deep in the forest on a moonless night, what ensues is a mysterious tale concerning memory and the nature of relationships.

In the Allen Bales Theatre, the UA Department of Theatre and Dance is performing “The River,” a no-frills play written by Jez Butterworth. Centered around one man’s relationships with the two other characters in the play, “The River” carries its audience through a winding stream of consciousness, often spinning and crashing quickly enough to develop a sort of whiplash.



CW / Joe Will Field

The strength of “The River” is that it raises questions and does not rush to answer them for the audience. It’s not a piece that attempts to hold your hand through disjointed twists and turns. Rather, it’s a piece that guides the viewer to the water and loses them in the moonless night. Second-year MFA theatre candidate Sam Nelson, who plays The Man, notes that this is what makes the play unique.

“I think ‘The River’ is defined by the audience,” Nelson said. “I think of Jez Butterworth as building these roads throughout the piece, with the intention of not finishing the road. That in and of itself is an experience for the audience – to experience an unfinished road, to experience an unanswered question, and to be able to define for themselves as audience members, ‘Do I want to finish the road that Jez Butterworth started building? Or do I want to stand on the edge and not answer the questions [raised by the piece]?’”

Posing these questions in an organic way is a difficult task. For this show, this task fell on the shoulders of the entire company. Director Reid Watson, also a second-year MFA theatre candidate, elaborated on the unique degree of collaboration present throughout the production.

“I said this to everybody, ‘You’re always welcome to come and be with us; the designer’s process doesn’t have to be separate from our process as a company,’” Watson said. “So [sound designer Benton Davis] came every single night pretty much, and he was in the room and played the guitar for us, and invented some environmental sounds as we experimented on our feet ... Seeing everybody embrace that company collaboration was the most enjoyable [aspect of production] for me.”

The audience can see the fruits of the collaborative process during the performance. Intricate attention to detail was paid throughout the play; the floor creaked beneath the feet of the actors as they trod throughout the cabin, the songs played through the radio grainy and textured, silences were filled with the chirping of crickets and croaking of frogs. The production goes the extra mile to immerse the audience into the world of “The River,” and it pays massive dividends.

However, what was perhaps the most impressive feat of the play was the intimate, often tense, atmosphere that engrosses the audience. With the furthest spectator being at most 20 feet away, every movement, every embrace, every contortion of the face is plainly in view. When the audience can observe and analyze every nuance of the production, room for misinterpretation is razor thin.

This week at Allen Bales, every action is being executed with great care and precision to the greatest effect. The characters don’t feel like characters at all, but people with their own motivations, traumas and histories. And this wasn’t an unpopular stance amongst the audience.

“I think [Nelson and Watson] actually really nailed the realistic relationship between the two women and your character,” said Nate Reid, a marketing manager and second-year MFA/MBA arts management candidate. “In [making me] believe that absolutely these people have an intimate relationship, a dynamic relationship, different relationships with threads of similarity that come across very realistically. As if we’re looking through the window of someone’s actual life.”

This happens to be an accomplishment that Watson would credit, in part, to a certain faculty member.

“This is new to our department,” Watson said. “Assistant professor Kelly Schroger worked with us as the intimacy director and movement coach on this piece, and she actually began her intimacy certification this summer in New York City, which is new to our world as theatre artists.”

For the first play of the season, it was a resounding success, filling most of the seats in the Allen Bales theatre for its first showing. “The River” provided a promising start to the new year for the Department of Theatre and Dance and a must-see experience for any theatre enthusiast who’s especially keen on themes of memory, loss and the nature of relationships.

For comparison’s sake, it’s faintly reminiscent of the 2004 film “Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind.” But unlike the Jim Carrey movie, the minds were certainly not spotless, and there was no sunshine illuminating the forest of “The River.” In fact, not even the moon was there to light the skies.