

My Thoughts on Swing State

By Zelda Gillespie

Note: This piece contains spoilers for Audible Theater's production of Swing State.

I went to the Minetta-Lane Theatre with my sister on a Friday night to see Swing State. My first impression was that the theater was pretty small, which I thought worked in the show's favor as there were only four characters that you really got to know well and so you could see everyone's face up close and see small details on stage that added to the story.

This was a show trying to get you to be sympathetic towards two, and later three, of the main characters (Peg, Ryan, and Danny) and in order to do that you need to make the play seem as realistic as possible. You need to really imitate real life. While the director (Robert Falls) and possibly scenic designer (Todd Rosenthal) could have been more accurate with their portrayal of some tasks (for example, making zucchini bread) because seeing something done incorrectly when the intention was to make everything realistic takes you briefly out of the story, the way Falls ordered actors to actually sweep and cook in the detailed kitchen set made it very real most of the time. When Ryan spills seeds during a panic attack, I felt concerned about how Peg would react.

Mary Beth Fisher and Bubba Weiler in Rebecca Gilman's Swing State. Photo Credi: Liz Lauren

The play was going for a dramatic theme with the main plot being about a widowed woman named Peg (Mary Beth Fisher) who owns a 40-acre prairie. She draws up a will giving the prairie to environmentalists, meanwhile giving the house to a young man named Ryan (Bubba Weiler) who Peg and her deceased husband spent time with. The will makes Ryan particularly concerned about Peg being preoccupied with her own death. This starts to get the play moving and helps the audience to understand why Peg was originally toying around with a knife, something that was the first noticeable plot point that really attracts interest.

Later, when Peg calls the local Sheriff Kris (Kirsten Fitzgerald) because some of her husband's tools and his gun were stolen, Sheriff Kris immediately suspects Ryan which worsens the relationship between the two. You can feel the tension between them as soon as Sheriff Kris comes into a scene, Peg gets angry at Ryan after hearing Ryan went out to drink after he had been sober for years. This was quite upsetting to hear about and while I was disappointed with Ryan's character, I was also partly frustrated at the sheriff for intervening and telling Peg the way she did because she uses that information unfairly. She

then proceeded to say she was right that Ryan wasn't a good person which wasn't well-meaning. When Ryan and Peg make up, Ryan gets Peg to admit that she has been forming a plan to commit suicide, something she has been thinking about since the death of her husband.

Kirsten Fitzgerald in Rebecca Gilman's *Swing State*. Photo Credit: Liz Lauren

Throughout this drama, I really gained sympathy for both Peg and Ryan and understood their struggles. Ryan admits he took the gun because he was concerned and had guessed Peg was considering suicide. But as they come to an understanding, Ryan gets the gun from under the porch and when he brings it back to Peg, Kris sees him with the gun, breaks in and angrily attacks him. Peg tries to explain Ryan was just trying to help her. When Kris is escalating everything, Ryan panics. So then Danny comes in and in the chaos shoots Ryan. The build up to that moment was intense and I really started to understand Ryan and why he was struggling and worrying about Peg, but I still didn't expect the gunshot which added such a feeling of betrayal. I felt like the play's pacing was slower at first, but it ended up with smoother pacing and built up to a heart-wrenching finish.

Overall, I had two big frustrations with the show. Number one: While they showed some of the process of Danny coping after she accidentally killed Ryan, it felt very unrealistic how quickly she managed to deal with it and even more unrealistic how quickly Peg was okay with Danny's actions. Everything was really well done up until then in the play but it just didn't feel so believable in regards to processing death and mental health. My other big, but less significant, frustration was that it introduced humor in ways I felt were unnecessary. I thought it really worked dramatically — from the content matter to the dramatic sound during a blackout transition in between scenes — but random jokes and other attempts at humor were distracting. Especially since the attempts at humor didn't really work like when Peg said something depressing, Ryan said a sarcastic "well...aren't you a ray of sunshine." I get that they may have been trying to lighten up an otherwise tough show and help the audience get through it, but I don't think those bits of humor need to be there.

Judging just as a drama, the understanding of Ryan that grows as the play goes on gets us from being neutral to him at best to sympathizing with him. I think the production effectively placed stories of the characters throughout the show to learn what we needed to learn as the play progresses. I really think this was one of the better plays I've seen. It's interesting and you get invested in the show and have strong feelings about the characters. Overall, I thought it was well written and the actors portrayed their characters convincingly and with care.

