

'The Night of the Iguana'

Actors' NET offers a Tennessee Williams classic

By Anthony Stoeckert
Jan 29, 2014



George Hartpence in *Night of the Iguana* at the Heritage Center in Morrisville, Pa.

NOT a lot happens in Tennessee Williams' *The Night of the Iguana*. The entire play takes place on the veranda of a cheap Mexican hotel. The main character is a minister who spends most of the play griping about life and dealing with a bunch of tourists, and another character spends the whole play writing one poem.

But plot isn't vital to good drama, as Actors' NET of Bucks County is proving with its run of *The Night of the Iguana*, which continues at the Heritage Center in Morrisville, Pa., through Feb. 2.

This is a character study in the truest sense of the term. It's a subtly emotional, tense experience, highlighted by wonderful language, rich characters, and, thanks to a talented cast, some stellar acting.

The cast is headed by George Hartpence as the Reverend T. Lawrence Shannon, a disgraced (but not defrocked) minister. Shannon is working as a guide for a two-bit tour company in Mexico. As the play opens, he's taken the group to the Costa Verde Hotel in Puerto Barrio. But

the women on tour are complaining because this isn't the hotel, or even the city, they're supposed to be in.

They're also angry at the reverend over a relationship he had with a minor. And while Shannon is desperate to keep this job, he doesn't make much effort to improve his situation.

Shannon explains to them that he made the choice for their benefit, and implores the tourists' leader Judith Fellowes (played by Susan Blair) to look at the beautiful view from the veranda. But the real motivation involves Maxine Faulk (Susan Fowler), the hotel's owner. Shannon wants to be near her — they may need each other, more likely, few others want anything to do with them — and perhaps put some money in her pocket.

At the hotel, Shannon meets Hannah Jelkes (Carol Thompson) and her father Jonathan (Mort Paterson). Jonathan is a poet, maybe even a good one, though not as good as Hannah claims he is. He is close to a great poem, he believes, and works on it, aloud several times over the course of the play.

Hannah, an artist, comes off as very proper. But we find out she's had her share of sufferings and doubt, and she and Shannon form a friendship, perhaps with the potential for more.

This play certainly isn't as well known as other works by Williams (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Cat On a Hot Tin Roof*), but it is often described as his last success, which is sad since it debuted in 1961, and he wrote for 20 more years.

And it certainly has its share of great lines. Some of them are funny (Miss Fellowes describes Maxine's rooms thusly: "They make a room at the Y look like a suite at the Ritz") to insightful ("people need human contact") to heartbreaking ("It's impossible for somebody to not think they are loved by someone they love").

Mr. Hartpence is terrific as Shannon. He was having voice problems the night I saw him (the previous night's show was canceled because of Mr. Hartpence's voice, and because of weather), but he was given a microphone so that he didn't have to strain his voice. They were a few hiccups with the microphone early on, but it was soon fixed, and it worked out fine.

Mr. Hartpence is all frustration and desperation as Shannon. But he's also lost as he doesn't really try to do anything to make his situation better. His Shannon is a lost soul, though one with a biting tongue.

As the women in Shannon's life, Susan Fowler and Carol Thompson are both quite good. They are opposite sides of the coin, though it turns out, they're both lost in their own ways. Mr. Paterson is another standout as the 100-year-old poet.

The play has some laughs that relieve the tension. Not only in some funny lines, but in a family of Germans who are excited about the Nazi rise (the play is set in 1940), and with some business involving Shannon being tied up in a hammock.

The set by Mr. Hartpence is the most convincing I've seen at the Heritage Center. A veranda dominates the front of the stage, and rooms with screen doors are in the background. It's just terrific stuff for a community group. Cheryl Doyle directs, and keeps the layered, talky story moving along.

In the end, there's an act of mercy, and an ambiguous ending. Does Shannon give up, or does he try to make a go of it?

I think he makes a go of it. But that doesn't mean I think he's in store for a happy ending.

Night of the Iguana continues at the Heritage Center, 635 N. Delmorr Ave., Morisville, Pa., through Feb. 2. Tickets cost \$20, \$17 seniors, \$10 children; www.actorsnetbucks.org; 215-295-3694.