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'Stick Fly' Doesn't Stick

Posted: 12/09/11 12:18 AM ET

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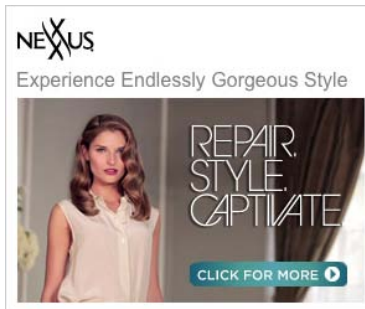
The house fly moves so fast that they can't even be studied in motion by filming them in flight. So apparently entomologists literally glue specimens to a popsicle stick and then use special techniques to capture the insect in action and study it with attention and care. Playwright Lydia R. Diamond uses the time-honored convention of a weekend in the country (in this case, Martha's Vineyard) to study the privileged upper class LeVay family. Unfortunately, *Stick Fly* never delivers on the conventional premise (despite the usual juicy revelations) or gives it a contemporary spin.

Kent (Dule Hill) and Harold (Mekhi Phifer) are both bringing home new women to meet the family. Kent is

the sensitive son repeatedly chided for having no focus in his career. In this case, "no focus" means Kent has multiple degrees from top institutions and a debut novel already in galleys with a prestigious boutique imprint. Slacker! His lettered father somehow thinks a career as an author is some sort of embarrassing joke. I guess James Baldwin and Toni Morrison are not on those bookshelves featured so prominently. Kent's guest is more than a girlfriend; it's his tightly wound, chip-on-her-shoulder fiancée Taylor (Tracie Thoms). She's an entomologist (hence the labored stick fly imagery) who had a famous father that rejected her and left Taylor on the outside looking in when it comes to the world Kent inhabits so easily.

Harold is more of a chip off the old block, though he's a plastic surgeon (read: superficial) who relentlessly sleeps with women and refuses to get tied down. He can't imagine getting serious about anyone, though his latest fling Kimber (Rosie Benton) gives as good as she gets. If Harold has a problem, it's Kimber's melanin deficiency, though he insists she's not white, she's Italian. It might be a funnier and more believable joke (tongue in cheek? defensive?) if Kimber weren't waspier than Doris Day. In retrospect, it makes no sense on any level and is just a cheap laugh (compounded by being used multiple times). Harold's comment simply makes no sense.

Their imperious father Joe (a fine Ruben Santiago-Hudson in the night's most consistent performance) deftly keeps everyone on their toes, enjoying the tension he creates with pointed put-downs and a refusal to avoid the uncomfortable, not that the younger generation needs any help in that regard.



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Toss in a maid called Cheryl (Condola Rashad) who is more a member of the family called with a secret it doesn't take long to guess, an unexpected past between Kent's fiancée and his dog of a brother (almost de rigueur for a play of this sort) and a mysteriously absent mother and you have everything you need for a night of comedy, intellectual sword play and soap-like twists. Everything except convincing characters that come to life and a story that transcends its contrivances.

Director Kenny Leon (who helmed the marvelous recent revival of *Fences*) hits enough of the comic beats to make the evening somewhat amusing from moment to moment. But he can't disguise the way *Stick Fly* seems to drag to its finale thanks to numerous confusions and inconsistencies that keep you from caring or even believing in any of these people. The battles over race and class instigated by Taylor and Kimber feel just like that: artificial tempests in a teapot. Certainly a woman like Kimber might lay into a complete stranger who is clearly offering up what she considers a painful story, but Diamond never lets us think this particularly provocative. Nor does Taylor (Thoms in the most mannered and unsuccessful performance of the night) come alive for even a moment as she gasps or explodes in anger or breaks down.

The men are little better. Hill has a wonderfully relaxed manner on TV in shows like *Psych* and *The West Wing* but here he and Phifer seem mannered and stilted. Surely much of this is due to odd twists in their characters. Kent begins the weekend by telling Taylor he's not even sure he likes her (to his new fiancée, by the way), stays away the entire night after her meltdown and at the climax of the show puts her in her place by finally telling her she really needs to keep her mouth shut. That's capped by him wondering how she could doubt that he would ever leave her. Huh? In fact, his climactic act of putting Taylor in her place (there's no other way to think of it) seemed so out of character for this intelligent man and so poorly set up that the audience tittered with laughter, unsure of what they were supposed to think.

Phifer has even more difficult dialogue to get over, including an awkward, unexciting come-on that his natural magnetism and stage presence can't inject any life into. Rashad (so good in the coruscating play *Ruined*) has the most fun as the maid Cheryl, getting to deliver some of the night's funnier lines and put everyone in their place with her righteous anger.

The set is a cluttered, jumbled mess that does keep the living room, kitchen, front door, front stairs, back stairs, patio and deck all on stage at the same time, but it comes at the cost of any visual appeal or sense of distinct spaces. I'm also not sure what to make of the music by the marvelously talented artist (and producer) Alicia Keys, which begins and ends with "classy" piano but mostly involves more generic contemporary beats. If these reflect any changes in the show or how we should feel about it, the theme is lost on me; Keys normally delivers melodies of more lasting appeal with ease.

It's telling that at the end of the night everyone is essentially the exact same person they were at the beginning and nothing we've learned has changed our opinion of them. This weekend in the country hasn't consistently entertained and it certainly hasn't offered insight. Mind you, the same can be said of most scientific observations. Diamond needs to wait until something striking and illuminating is captured before filing her next report.

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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these shows with the understanding that he

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12:14 PM on 12/10/2011

It's telling that at the end of the night everyone is essentially the exact same person they were at the beginning and nothing we've learned has changed our opinion of them.

Slice of life is very tricky. The apparent realism often misses the mark. Hard to pitch right so that it's not boring. I prefer melodrama. It's closer to the reality where we live. Our minds.

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Michael Giltz
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10:07 PM on 12/13/2011

Good point. Thanks for sharing your comment. In this case, I think the plot is closer to melodrama than slice of life however -- a lot of juicy revelations are offered up during the show.

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