Us vs Them Review (thehappymedium.com)

It’s rare that a six-degrees of separation type plot unravels as elegantly as ***Us vs. Them.***

The play, written by Wesley Broulik and directed by Michelle Seaton, begins simply enough at a road side rest stop where two sisters have pulled over to take a break, stock up on some fortifying snacks, and continue to get reacquainted after an apparently long estrangement.

It’s Christmas time and Nicole (Siouxsie Suarez) has made the trip to pick up her sister, Katy (Maria Itzel Siegrist), so that they can spend the holiday with their ailing mother. Throughout the conversation bits and pieces of their family’s history come out in a natural, off handed way, with out the awkwardly phrased exposition some playwrights will fall back on which often tends to cripple a scene and take the audience right out of the moment. Rather, Katy and Nicole have the same awkward hesitancy which can flip into *don’t-try-it-because-I-know-exactly-how-to-press-your-buttons* and back again – something that can only come naturally from two sisters who grew up close and then grew apart.

From this initial scene we then move through a series of one-act vignettes which all stem from these two main branches; each building upon the last, each new story having been referenced in an erlier scene either as an important footnote or merely as background information. Therefore, when we next see Katy the timeline has shifted and we are (it seems) seeing her right before the road trip has occured when she is having a night with her romantic interest, the firefighter Kris (Christopher Halladay). From their scene together we find out a little bit more about the life Katy’s been leading since moving away; we also find out about Kris and his teen daughter Dannie (Dannie Flanagan). Much later, we will meet Dannie as she and her father deal head-on with Dannie’s leap into adulthood and her first serious sexual relationship.

Nicole’s story is similarly interwoven. We are brought back to a night that occurred before the road trip for her as well and we meet her partner, a vulnerable yet angry woman named T (Michelle Steaton), who is simultaneously hateful and heartbreaking. It’s obvious the two women have a lot of baggage that they brought into the relationship – problems with alcohol, trust issues, violent tendencies, but despite it all there is a real love between them that struggles to persevere. T speaks of a past that she needed to leave behind – and soon enough that past is unfolding before us as she goes back home for her own Christmas visit. We meet her father Eddie (Eric Michael Gillet), T’s sister Barbara (Brooke Page) and Barbara’s husband Howard (Welsey Broulik). Once we see this bunch suddenly T’s anger doesn’t seem so unprovoked anymore.

The character of Howard is played by playwright Broulik and to his credit he doesn’t cast himself as the hero of this piece – rather he’s probably the most deserving of a punch in the face. (I won’t give anything away, but in a family like this one, chances are good that he gets it). Howard is demeaning to all those around him, speaks to his wife Barbara as if she were stupid, and has very little respect for the family he’s married into. In fact, he does a great job of making some unlikeable people seem a lot more likeable when he’s around.

And that’s the gift of Broulik the playwright. In ***Us vs. Them*** he’s managed to make you dislike a character for their failings one moment and then staunchly defend them as they come under attack the next moment. His gift of being able to present a fully formed character is as sharp as his ability to create a wonderfully knitted storyline that walks right up to the edge of sentimentality without tipping over into the marsh of sappy. There will be moments during this show that will have you nodding in recognition, as well as recoiling in revulsion. And it is exactly because these human beings are frayed, chipped, scarred and wrinkled that they are so real. Some times they are Us. Some times they are Them. Throughout it all – they are worth seeing.