**[The Dark Side of the Luna](http://offoffonline.com/?p=5417" \o "Permalink to The Dark Side of the Luna)**

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*Us vs. Them* begins with a scene featuring a Big Gulp and a bi-lingual argument set against a backdrop of piped in Christmas music. This sets the tone for Dark Luna’s inaugural production, which is equal parts dark comedy and family drama. Though the concept of family dysfunction revolving around forced holiday togetherness is not completely original, it is the earnest acting of the eight member cast, and the cohesive design concept, that keeps *Us vs. Them* from seeming cliché.

Written by Wesley Broulik, who also plays Howard, *Us vs. Them* has an engaging plot with well rendered characters and just the right amount of mystery. Yet, the play still manages to showcase the actors over the writing. In a series of scenes we are introduced to sisters Nicole (Siouxsie Suarez) and Katy (Maria Itzel Siegrist), firefighter Kris (Christopher Halladay) and his daughter Dannie (Dannie Flanagan), and Nicole’s girlfriend “T” (Michelle Steaton), T’s father Eddie (Eric Michael Gillet), T’s sister Barbara (Brooke Page) and Barbara’s husband Howard (Welsey Broulik). The links between these individuals and their stories are often re-contextualized as the play moves along.

I was continually drawn in by the relationships among the characters rather than the words themselves, which is clearly something that director (and actor) Michelle Seaton has fostered. Each actor not only connects and listens to his or her scene partners, but also maintains the same level of engagement in the creative scene changes. As the lights go down on the minimalist set, actors moving their props and set pieces stay in character, noticing and reacting to each other and the changes being made to the space.

Ed Hill’s set is decidedly simple and effective, consisting of a couch, a chair, and several cardboard boxes, while the walls are covered with a web of string, adorned with photographs of the various characters. Since the set itself creates an aesthetic of connectivity, these transitions serve to increase the audience’s sense of company and collectivity. In other words, when set against a stage decorated with a literal web, the in-character scene changes reaffirm the *Us vs. Them* mentality that exists in theater. Even in between scenes, the actors are onstage and in the web, while we are outside of it.

The moments in which actors are really looking and listening to each other are thrilling to watch. They happen here, though they rarely happen in monologues. The language seems to force the actors to push a little too hard, partially because of the amount of anger demanded in their monologues. Characters anger quickly and stay angry for large parts of scenes, causing the individual speeches to lack the dramatic arcs better rendered in the dialogue. For example, Nicole (Sioxsie Suarez) is less believable in her rant to her lover “T” (Michelle Seaton) about T’s drinking than she is seconds later in an impassioned dialogue about the nature of their relationship. Despite the occasional “thigh slap” or “sighing out” (two common acting tics) that accompanied some of these monologues, each and every cast member was able to engage me at certain moments. A standout scene occurs later in the play between Barbara (Brooke Page) and Dannie (Dannie Flanagan), who both give beautifully nuanced and genuine performances.

In a play about the various forms of love and family, Dark Luna ends up showing us the importance of these themes both within the play and in the environment of a theater company. Both require hard work, love, and support. Though this play might not be profound in its written words, the production as a whole has a lot to offer. *Us vs. Them* is a journey to the dark side of the moon, with Dark Luna’s passionate actors and artistic/production team as guides, which is worth the sometimes bumpy ride.

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