

Itching for more

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by PAUL WOZNIAK

MSU's 'Bug' is a mind-bending journey

Did you hear that? It sounds like the smoke detector. Or maybe it's a hive of bugs hiding in your walls. MSU Department of Theatre's production of Tracy Letts' "Bug" never answers the question, but it does toy with your brain for two intense hours.

To be clear, the performances alone — from outgoing master's students Jacqueline Wheeler and Zev Steinberg — make this show worth seeing. Add Letts' kaleidoscopically mesmerizing script and Rob Roznowski's superb direction and you get drama that's arguably better than Big Ten basketball.

"Bug"

7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Apr. 1 & Thursday, Apr. 2; 8 p.m. Friday, Apr. 3; 2 p.m. Saturday, Apr. 4 \$10 Arena Theatre
542 Auditorium Road, MSU campus, East Lansing (800) WHARTON, whartoncenter.com

We find Agnes (Wheeler) in a squalid motel room just off a busy highway near Oklahoma City, accompanied by her booze collection and a coffee table covered in powdery white lines. When her friend R.C. (Imani Bonner) brings along an intensely anti-social Peter (Steinberg) for a visit, trying to find a place for him to sleep, she inadvertently triggers a dark and tragic chain of events.

Wheeler is stunning as the beaten and distrustful Agnes. Clad in a denim skirt and covered in bruises from her ex-husband, Jerry (an intimidating Jake Samson), Agnes just wants to be loved. She finds that love in Peter — along with a world of crazy.

As Peter, Steinberg is the kinetic fuel propelling the play's slow-burn plot. Steinberg's direct stare and calculated intensity only hint at Peter's inner thoughts. A veteran with disturbing recollections of government experiments, Peter uses crafty logic to convince Agnes that he's not insane — even as they cover the walls in tin foil. Steinberg's skill is convincing the audience that Peter has a point.

A less patient director might allow "Bug" devolve into a feedback loop of screaming and shouting. But, like the bugs that Agnes and Peter think they see crawling on their skin, this show breathes. The entire cast and crew seem tuned to the same frequency, allowing for silences that intensify the ever growing tension. By the end, the show and the audience are practically hyperventilating.

Essential technical elements include Kenzie Carpenter's spectacular sound design, effectively altering your sense of time and the nature of reality, and scenic design by Melissa Hunter. Hunter converts the appropriately claustrophobic Arena theater into a disgustingly realistic looking interior of a flea-bag motel (emphasis on the fleas), complete with stained carpeting and "fresh from the dumpster" furniture.

If you have a severe aversion to insects, skin rashes, blood, profanity or acutely irrational thought, you should probably avoid "Bug." For everyone else, this show is a must-see mind trip. It's the most fun you could have with a delusional, paranoid schizophrenic.



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