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Summerworks: Characters reborn, reinvented and seeking redemption

By **BRUCE DEMARA** Entertainment Reporter

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Aftershock

Recommended

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Amy Rutherford is a hauntingly tortured and conflicted Anna in *Aftershock*, now on as part of Summerworks. (HANDOUT)

By Evan Tsitsias. Directed by Rod Ceballos. Until Aug. 14 at the Factory Theatre Studio.

When Anna returns home following a major cosmetic surgery makeover, her family surrounds her, awed by the dramatic change. But while her exterior has undergone a transformation — whiter teeth, bigger boobs, a nose job — has anything really changed inside?

Anna's husband, Gary, calls her an "angel" and promises to give up his gambling and penchant for sudden, brutal violence. Her sister, Becky, feels even more unattractive and unloved,

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“I’m exactly the same except I feel worse than before,” Anna realizes. And in an odd, surreal twist, she is rooted to the same spot onstage, literally unable to move. As time passes and life goes on around her. Anna then undertakes a process of self-mutilation that becomes progressively more difficult to watch.

Bolstered by a strong cast, *Aftershock* is an uneasy blend of comedy — much of it provided by her mom (played with relish by Lynne Griffin) who derives much of her pseudo-wisdom from fortune cookies — and eerie tension, provided by Patrick Garrow as Gary, a villain who alternates between good humour and chilling menace. Sister Becky (played by Allana Harkin) is also funny but should take mom’s advice and “bring it down to five” on the intensity scale. Quinn, nicely underplayed by Catherine Rainville, is probably the only one worth saving. Amy Rutherford is a hauntingly tortured and conflicted Anna.

There’s plenty of food of thought in the script about the nature of beauty and the possibility of change. The message that beauty is superficial and real transformation is truly hard work resonates in a tale that will leave the audience both squirming and thinking.

The Saddest Girl in the World

Recommended

By Cassie Beacham. Directed by Melissa Major. Until Aug. 15 at Theatre Passe Muraille Backspace.

El may or may not be the saddest girl in the world but she is surely one of the oddest. While one characters says she’s got, “a Joan of Arc vibe,” El denies she’s depressed, declaring she’s filled with “dark enthusiasm.”

“Why don’t you do outside today?” asks her mother, who is at her wit’s end to figure out her moody daughter. Mom finally loses her patience and demands that El start paying rent or get the heck out, so El latches on to the two renters upstairs and starts having sex with each of them in exchange for money.

In her dreams, she also talks to the deer that died a slow, painful death after colliding with the family car, an accident that claimed her father’s life. The deer is not much better at pulling El out of her emotional torpor.

The character of El (played nicely by Noa May Dorn) is far from easy to warm up to. But there is something about her and the play itself that is oddly endearing.

It helps to have a very solid cast, particularly Ryan Fisher as Alex, the lothario roommate who finds El interesting despite his better judgment, and Justin Pettas Bently as the chier, more

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The set, consisting of three long strips of wrinkly fabric hanging from the rafters, is wonderfully simple, allowing the actors to hide between them at strategic moments or let the lights play off them to good effect at other times. Snatches of music provide nice accompaniment. The dialogue is witty and occasionally salty and the characters quirky in the extreme.

And yet, this sad girl is more likely to leave you with a smile on your face.

Shed

Recommended

By Leah Jane Esau. Directed by Justin Madol. Until Aug. 14 at Factory Theatre Mainspace until Aug. 14.

When 13-year-old Jeremy dies after being locked inside a shed that is set on fire, a police officer tries to extract confessions from two troubled teens and to gather get some insight into the crime. But *Shed* refuses to provide any simple answers.

Mitch, 13, has to be talked down from a rooftop where he is still awaiting a birthday phone call from his mother. Erin, 16, plays a dangerous game of seduction with the officer. The third guilty party, someone named Mouse, never appears, allowing the other two characters to conveniently point the finger of blame elsewhere.

Jovan Kocic does a fine job in his portrayal of Mitch as an alienated teen smoldering with rage. Likewise, Kyrstina Bojanowski as Erin is equally watchable though far more enigmatic. Simon Derome creates a sympathetic portrait of the victim, Jeremy, a friendless boy with a limp who endures Mitch's abuse in the vain, pathetic hope that they will be friends for a long time.


The story by Leah Jane Esau shifts in time from before and after the crime, evoking a powerful sense of dread while providing a cryptic and fragmented picture of the two young killers and their motivations.

The production, while far from perfect — the set, for example, seems like a missed opportunity — is still dark and disturbing.

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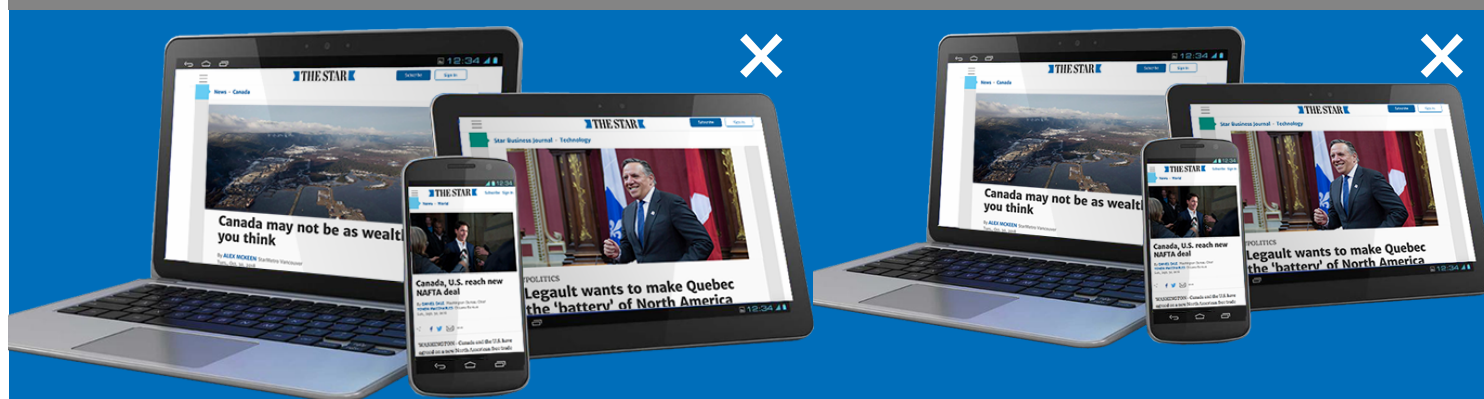
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