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A Picture of Autumn: The Mint Theatre's New Production Is a Study of Home

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Coming to New York's Mint Theatre is like tuning into a classic movies channel, except productions are rarely familiar. It has been artistic director Jonathan Bank's mission to unearth forgotten small theatrical gems from decades past.

A Picture of Autumn, British playwright N.C. Hunter's first play, would seem to have the pedigree. After all, Hunter went on to write subsequent West End productions that starred the likes of Sirs John Gielgud and Ralph Richardson. And on Broadway, Jessica Tandy and Hume Cronyn brought his words to life.

The *Times of London* credited the 20th-century playwright as "a writer who brought a new tone and unfamiliar nuances into the English theatre." Just knowing *Autumn* had never seen an American stage likely made the Mint artistic staff downright giddy.

Set in the Mint's typically well-crafted stage capturing worn elegance of a British country estate's main living room, the audience is introduced to an elderly couple, Sir Charles and Lady Margaret Denham, played genially by Jonathan Hogan and Jill Tanner. Also present is the husband's eccentric yet occasionally clear-minded brother Harry [George Morfogen], and a fiercely kooky, independent nameless servant, played frighteningly well by Barbara Eda-Young.

The four are the only souls occupying the 18-bedroom spread. It's far too big and costly for them to manage, and it has gone much to seed both inside and out. With the house having been in the family for two-centuries, the issue that drives the story is summed up Bard-like by Henry: "To move or not to move?"

Despite his romantic penchant, Henry coolly observes the drama being played out as "farce, not tragedy." And if the family doesn't take the buyer's offer and stays on, he wonders if they won't end up living out their days in regret.

Of course he's right on both counts, especially when one realizes the play was written just several years after the end of the Second World War. With British cities and towns still reeling after endless bombing, the tale is a bit escapist, colored with plenty of screwball. Certainly the playwright (a war veteran himself) thought it was as good a time as any to see how the aging aristocracy was getting on.

The Mint likely saw the play's timeless theme as one that would touch its own elderly patrons and regulars. Deciding whether or not to give up one's home that shelters decades of memories can be heart-wrenching trauma. Oddly, the family is oblivious to how fortunate it is to have a solid roof over its head in the first place. But let that go, and the story's charming zaniness starts to grab hold. And by the end of the first act, Hunter seems to turn from this singular focus.

Uncle Harry suddenly sees the spitting image of his bride lost 60 years prior, reincarnate in his great niece, Felicity [Helen Cespedes]--the daughter of his brother's son Robert [Paul Niebanck] -- descending the grand staircase. One almost wants to rub one's hands in anticipation to where the playwright plans to take us.

In their ability to span such a large gulf in age, these two share some of the play's most touching moments. Their meeting propels the collision of generations -- an ode to the house as it were -- as all characters are prompted to look both forwards and backwards as parallel universes intersect in the remembrances of times and people. In the process, there's reflection about whether one's happiness and sense of self-worth is rooted in one's company, sense of obligation toward others, and sturdiness of familiar walls that surround and protect.

This comedic-drama only strafes this psychological space. But in this way, the production displays a familiar Mint quality, most recently seen in its last show, *Katie Roach*, where a myriad of splendid ideas are postured about but detoured around in favor of focus on a basic story line.

This subtlety of production is very much Mint. In *Autumn*, we see a play of compelling simplicity that's a snapshot of a turning point in a family's life, a painting with small, intimate details set within the theatre's always attractive staging, brought to life by a solid cast and direction.

With likeable characters, splashes of humor, and occasional wit, that may be enough.

But with dialogue focused on housecleaning, cooking, the weather, caring for aging parents, suggested adultery, sibling rivalry, and shooting up the local wildlife, one can't help to wonder how quickly banality has replaced the trauma of war, of which the playwright was no doubt keenly aware.

