

A MOON FOR THE MISBEGOTTEN

By Eugene O'Neill

Virginia Stage Company

Jan. 23---Feb. 8, 2009

For tickets: (757) 671-8100 or (757) 627-1234

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

The curtain is up when we enter the theatre. On stage is a falling down shack of a dwelling. It is home for the Hogans or what remains of that shanty Irish tenant farmer family. The mother died giving birth to the youngest child, Mike, neatly played by Jon Norton. He is running away from this desolate place as the play begins. To call it a farm is a glamorizing exaggeration. It's a rock pile that produces fair crops of milkweed, thistle and poison ivy. There are seemingly a few pigs to slop that provide food for what's left of the Hogans, namely, the drunkard bawdy father Phil and his rather special daughter Josie.

The land they live on belongs to the Tyrone family and is in probate and will be sold . The potential buyer, T. Stedman Harder, played by John Cauthen, already owns adjacent property and is eager to expand his holdings by evicting the Hogans. The scheming father and daughter are determined to outsmart Mr. Harder. Their idea is to lure Tyrone into Josie's bed to force him to marry her.

Much credit for this penetrating, provocative production must go to Director Edward Morgan. He is working with a less than ideal cast but even so he unearths the plays powerful currents of passion, loneliness and despair. Kate Udall as Josie and Gordon Joseph Weiss are able to serve his vision.

Udall is not traditional casting for Josie. O'Neill says "she is so big she is almost a freak." Her own father calls her a "big, ugly cow of a woman." O'Neill implies she cannot accept her body. Udall, while statuesque, has an underlying elegance and intelligence that she can't conceal. However, Josie also has a sweet side that she doesn't reveal until the soul purging night she and the misbegotten Jamie Tyrone spend under the moonlight. She makes this latter half of the play her own world in a deeply moving performance that is far more important than the hog slopping earth mother of the first part.

In the dynamic second half we learn that Josie and Jamie have been hiding behind secrets. I have to say that I found Jack Koenig's James Tyrone enigmatic at best. He is too neat and controlled, even though he often speaks of experiencing the alcohol driven "heebie geebies." Tyrone is a hopeless booze hound and a second rate washed up actor. He is riddled with guilt that he tries to drown in whiskey or smother in the arms of cheap tarts. In Koenig's performance, we never believe the agony of the man, the unrelenting, unquenchable suffering that he is hiding behind "actor kidding" and playful banter with Phil Hogan and Josie. In short, he lacks inner life.

Gordon Joseph Weiss, full of blarney and whiskey, is a delight. He also lets us see glimpses of his dark sides in wonderfully subtle ways. He provides much of the humor that laces the evening. In doing this play the director must determine how much laughter is needed. Director Morgan has made the right choices. There are genuinely funny moments but at the same time they are only veils over the agony of the characters struggling for survival beneath them.

Bill Clarke's set is so real you can almost smell the pigs and Beverly Emmons' lighting is sheer perfection.

I have been privileged to see two major productions of this play. Each was distinct. This version is special as well, quite different in many ways from the other two, but, as directed by the resourceful Mr. Morgan, it strongly articulates O'Neill's themes. A visit to the Wells is highly recommended.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.