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### [A Dream Play](#)



Katy Carkuff (Agnes) & Ashley Ivey (Solicitor)

by August Strindberg

Adapted by Caryl Churchill

Produced by [Constellation Theatre Company](#) at the Source Theatre

Directed by Allison Arkell Stockman

Reviewed by Tim Treanor

Does the D.C. area really need another professional theater? You bet it does. As long as theater has important things to say, and theater professionals have the wit and craft to say them, we will benefit from it no matter who the producing company is - as this wildly ambitious, somewhat uneven but generally successful production shows.

Swedish playwright August Strindberg, a deeply troubled soul who first attempted suicide when he was eight, was primarily a social realist. He wrote *A Dream Play* in 1901 after recovering from a psychotic episode in which he fantasized that witches were attempting to murder him. It was his first venture into surrealism, and one of the first such works by any playwright. Naturally, his understanding of the human psyche was tentative and primitive; Freud had published *The Interpretation of Dreams* only a year previously, and Jung, Ellis and Moll were all in the future. Nonetheless, Strindberg wrote a powerful and convincing picture of human yearning and suffering, conscious and unconscious.

One hundred four years later, the outstanding British playwright Caryl Churchill vetted Strindberg's play, trimming and reorganizing it and updating its references, but leaving his psychological and sociological conclusions intact. It is this version which the Constellation Theater Company presents to us.

In it, Agnes (Katy Carkuff) is a goddess who has assumed human form so that she can better understand the human experience. At the play's outset, she is thrust into a bundle of circumstances which defy her understanding, and ours. Someone, for no discernable purpose, is building a tower; inside the tower a soldier (Matthew Eisenberg) is whacking a table with his sword; the soldier does not leave until his mother (Callie Kimball) appears, ten years after she died.

A woman (Lisa Lias) gives Agnes a battered coat which holds, she says, the world's sorrows, and Agnes wears them willingly in her quest for knowledge. Her quest is our quest. What she sees, we also see. Dozens of events tumble out for Agnes' review and ours. Dreamlike, they make no sense, but they all have a common pattern: hopes raised, and disappointed. The soldier, whose name is Alfred, falls in love with the beautiful Victoria (Catherine Deadman), who promises herself to him but does not leave her room, though he waits for months on end. A sad-sack solicitor (Ashley Ivey) is promised a doctorate, but when he goes to receive his degree it is given instead to Alfred. Alfred, now awarded a doctorate, finds himself in a grammar school classroom, unable to remember the product of two times two. A billionaire (Kevin Boggs) is sad because he is blind, and cannot see his son go off to war in a troop ship. And so on. What appear to be triumphs become disappointments: a man (Keith E. Irby) gets the fishing net he's wanted all his life, but is disappointed because it's not the right shade of green.

Agnes is a goddess made human. Except for the scenes she has with Ivey, Carkuff and director Allison Stockman's choice is to emphasize Agnes' divine qualities, and as a result many of her speeches sound like orations, rather than dialogue. It's a defensible decision, particularly given the rhetorical quality of much of the dialogue, but it does make her character a little less appealing and the play a little less accessible. The play's opening, in which she and Eisenberg's Alfred exchange improbable dialogue under improbable circumstances, bears an uncomfortable resemblance to Greek melodrama. It is not until Kimball enters as the dead

mother that we are treated to fully human words exchanged by fully human (though not completely alive) characters, and we can see how good the play is going to be.

Agnes has three principal partners in her voyage of discovery: Alfred, the solicitor, and a writer played by Misty Demory. All three actors give strong performances but none so much so as Ivey, who meticulously displays his character's passage from idealism and hope to bitterness and regret. From the moment Ivey walks onstage with his oversized, immaculately soiled suit (all of Jennifer Tardiff's costumes were terrific) he is the epitome of forlorn hope, and it is easy to see why Agnes falls in love with him. Her dauntless bravado is the perfect accompaniment to his agonized anxiety. ("What if we bore each other?" he asks, Woody Allen-like. "We'll have a baby!" she replies brightly.) One baby later, they are like millions of other couples, at war over trivia - whether to paste over cracks in the wall (the era's solution to heat loss), whether to buy a beautiful flower or forty pounds of potatoes, housekeeping. It is easy to see why Agnes falls out of love with him in these scenes. By tweaking a few of the solicitor's salient characteristics, Ivey has turned him from sweetly appealing to cloyingly annoying. That's acting, brothers and sisters.

In a genuinely powerful and excellent ensemble, one other actor merits special praise. Craig Klein plays four characters (the cast of eleven takes on forty roles) with such élan that he brightens the stage every time he steps on it. He is particularly effective as a quarantine master, spraying a tropical paradise with a sulfurous mixture while wearing bug-eyed moon suit and cackling with a bureaucrat's undisguised glee at the misfortune of others. But he is also an opera singer, an exhausted building worker, and a Bishop, and plays each role convincingly. The other ensemble actors similarly establish diverse characters in a few words and gestures (Irby does particularly well with significantly different characters).

*A Dream Play* offers formidable technical as well as acting challenges, and Constellation surmounts them wonderfully. A.J. Guban's magical set and lighting, and Brendon Vierra's excellent sound, allow us to see the dream in *A Dream Play*. Ivey is responsible for the choreography - he manages to get four couples to dance on Source's small stage - and for the props, he made the excellent decision to create the baby out of a tiny bundle of rags and sounds.

Above all is the bravura accomplishment of director Stockman, who manages to make this difficult and complicated play go with atomic-clock timing and laserlike precision - while at the same time placing Constellation firmly on the map of serious professional theaters in Washington.

On the evening I saw the show there was an unexpected member of the audience - a little tyke, perhaps seven years old. Although there's nothing in the play inappropriate for a young child, it does seem designed for adults. Yet this child was *fascinated* by what he saw, gurgling with delight at the effects and laughing unabashedly at the clever lines. If, as some theorize, children are more at home with and closely attuned to their unconscious than adults are, it appears that Stockman and her cast got this one right.

By way of full disclosure I should tell you that Kimball is a colleague of mine at DC Theatre Reviews, in that she conducted a podcast interview with director Des Kennedy and I hope she will conduct more. I do not believe this affected my review of the play. You can tell for certain, though, by seeing the production yourself - it's only eighteen bucks - and then writing in to say whether you agree with me or not.

(*Running time: 1:20*). *A Dream Play* continues at the Source Theatre Thursdays through Sundays until July 8. Sunday performances are at 3; all other shows are at 8. Tickets are \$18 on Fridays and Saturdays; students and seniors are \$2 off. For tickets, call 800. 494.8497 or order [online](#).

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I'm looking for the exact quote from A Dream Play, where someone says something like: "Human beings are to be pitied". Can anyone help?

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