



# The Culture Buzz

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### **How great is *Gatsby* on stage?**

A theatre review by John Busbee

January 27, 2017 F. Scott Fitzgerald. “The Great Gatsby.” Two iconic references in the American lexicon of literature. Intertwined with its social and economic infusions from the Roaring 20s, a spellbinding appeal was created, perhaps as vibrantly strong today as it was almost a hundred years ago. The question is, does the critically acclaimed prose lift from the page and successfully translate onto the stage. Or, even film, for that matter, but the stage is our venue this time around.

Simon Levy’s stage adaptation seems to fall short of bringing Fitzgerald’s memorable literary characters to fully developed life. Levy’s best translation was his story anchor of narrator Nick Carraway, who steps in and out of the story arc. The theater of the mind that Fitzgerald’s original work evokes in vibrant hues does not, however, provide an equal theatrical counterpart on stage. A feeling of synopsis or Cliff’s Notes versus the full story seems to inhabit Levy’s efforts.

Director John Viars tackles the inherent challenges of bringing this story to life on stage, with a dedicated ensemble filled with a majority of first-timers on the Playhouse stage. The production team truly meets this challenge, giving this show a unified sheen that shifts from stylish to ethereal to symbolic with a sensuous ease. More on that later.

Fitzgerald’s story uses Nick Carraway (Benjamin Sheridan) as the catalyst, providing the narrative and in-scene presence throughout. Sheridan masterfully anchors this production, shifting between character and narrative muse with a beguiling ease. His opening monologue sets a special, deep foreboding tone. The rest of the characters enter the story, revealing motives and flaws, and the complex puzzle begins to settle into place. Needing more range and initial mystique, Matthew Phillip Smith still conveys a polished veneer hiding his belief that the past can be recaptured – his infatuation with Daisy. As Daisy, newcomer Emma Kay Banner works to achieve the irresistibility of her role, not quite achieving the necessary fragility coupled with her allure. Shelby Jensen, another newcomer, gives her Jordan Baker a strong flapper persona, covering a willingness to break rules to win. Mason Ferguson possesses the physical hulking that Tom Buchanan needs as Daisy’s oppressive and philandering husband. Greg Blumhagen’s George Wilson is plodding, obtuse, countering the flamboyance and frustration of his wife, Myrtle, who is very ably portrayed by Kate Fitzgerald with a defiance while she willingly pursues her illicit relationship with Tom. As Gatsby’s associate, Meyer Wolfsheim, Jason Rainwater carries himself with an aloofness and distance needed for his role.

The most impressive aspect of this production is its visual and aural representation. Travis George’s scenic and projection design work consistently conveys the audience into Fitzgerald’s world. Filled with impressions, silhouettes and nuances, many of the passing images possessed a wispy, smoky feel to them – marvelous. The other major eye-candy was Angela Lampe’s costuming. Elegance, other-era and dazzling, her palette was diverse and appealing.

In a season filled with exceptional titles, *F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby* may fall short of meeting the expectations of discerning theatre-goers expecting to see these characters become fully formed live counterparts to their literary muses. Part of the shortcoming lies in the Levy’s script. There are many fine moments and elements which make this a worthy venture to the Des Moines Community Playhouse, however, encouraging patrons to delve back into the book for comparison. *F. Scott Fitzgerald’s The Great Gatsby* runs through February 12.