
'Paradise Park' celebrates dreamers



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A tour through Charles Mee's "Paradise Park," now playing at the Signature Theatre Company, is a fantastical trip, despite occasional undertones of despair.

This run-down amusement park is home to a group of seven longtime visitors who embody a range of American dreamers. They cheerfully tell newcomer Benny, beguilingly portrayed by William Jackson Harper, that they are lost at the park. Some claim to have been there for more than 10 years.

Benny joins the group on a tour of the park, and a series of fast-paced vignettes ensues, each with its own video background, musical interlude and often-absurd version of an amusement park attraction or arcade game. The characters gradually convey their back stories and views about life, love and family relationships. Their ruminations are infused with existential philosophy, comedy, and occasionally tragedy — at times, all three at once.

Veanne Cox is riveting as Nancy, a conflicted mother of two daughters, one of whom she and her morose husband, Morton (Christopher McCann) have raised at the amusement park since the death of their other daughter a decade earlier. Both parents carry much guilt and grief, which they often incorporate into the craziness of the games in which everyone apparently must participate.

Their moody teenage daughter, Darling, who yearns to get away from her parents and start to live her own life, is movingly portrayed by Vanessa Aspillaga. These three repeatedly clash verbally, almost as if driving imaginary bumper cars.

Other characters also try repeatedly to connect, without initial success. Benny, who quickly falls for the graceful, roller-skating Ella (an edgy Laurie Williams), can't seem to get on her wavelength. Still, despite constant misunderstandings, these two keep their dialogue going.

Talented ventriloquist Alan Semok plays Edgar and his expressive dummy, Mortimer. Calmly observing everyone else's interactions, Edgar/Mortimer eventually lecture the entire group about the value of relationships and community, then discover they are not outside the human emotional fray after all.

These people come across as real, if archetypal, individuals, seriously examining their lives during absurd situations. Director Daniel Fish keeps the cast moving around smoothly, as they dash about and navigate a stage increasingly piled with various carnival props. Peter Pucci's choreography enables the characters to hustle, conga, waltz and even square dance.

The slightly tired appearance of David Zinn's set reflects the world-weariness of some of the group members. Characters occasionally crash deliberately into a wall made of colorful lights, or lounge around the sole bumper car. Numerous tacky props are either hung on the walls or drop from the ceiling as needed. Yet the seedy fun house atmosphere doesn't deter people from genuinely reaching out to one another.

The recorded soundtrack is eclectic Americana. In keeping with the carnival atmosphere, some live accordion music is expertly squeezed out by Bill Schimmel. Evocative video projections by Joshua Thorson add to the dark undercurrents. Is that a mushroom cloud at the beginning of the "Nuclear Family" segment?

Although less than paradise, this park provides much to ponder, and that doesn't even include the fruitcake toss.

"Paradise Park" runs through April 6.