

Robert Cushman: Domesticated is Paul Gross' best stage work to date



The great thing about Bruce Norris' plays is that they contain no sympathetic characters. Norris is the American playwright responsible for *Clybourne Park*, which we saw a few years ago, and *Domesticated*, which is running now. Most American drama is sentimental; Norris is a refreshingly astringent voice.

Like *Clybourne Park*, *Domesticated* has two contrasting halves. The earlier play spanned two periods in the life of a black family in a formerly all-white neighbourhood; among other things, it showed us two stages of competitive gentrification. *Domesticated* shows us two periods in the life, for want of a better word, of a marriage. Here, though, the division is a matter less of time than of dominant voice. Act One, at least in terms of number of words spoken, belongs to the wife, Act Two to the husband.

The husband is a man of Clintonian sexual appetite, and indeed his name is Bill. He isn't president, but he is a prominent political figure, one who has also achieved great professional success as a doctor: a gynaecologist in fact. He's also a frequent frequenter of prostitutes, including a young one who, when they were together, slipped and hit her head and went into a coma. Did she fall or was she pushed? Bill of course claims the former, but the optics are still terrible. We find him, at the start of the play, making the traditional public apology while his wife Judy, equally traditionally, stands tight-lipped by her man. Bill's aria of contrition is practically all he gets to say before the intermission, though we do see and hear him breaking into humiliated tears, probably genuine, at the family dinner-table.

Bill and Judy have two daughters. The younger, adopted

and Cambodian, is silent, at least at home. The elder is volubly dismissive of both her parents, though mostly of course of her father, her contempt accentuated by the fact that there is now insufficient money to put her through the college of her choice. Judy has tried to exploit the situation by writing a book about it, but it hasn't sold as well as was hoped. Everybody in the play is in the exploitation business, financially or psychologically or both. The comatose girl's mother goes on an Oprah-like TV show, relishing her minutes of fame while her ever-so-empathetic host monopolises most of the conversation; in Philip Riccio's production (for Company Theatre and CanStage) these roles are not so much inhabited as impaled by Sarah Dodd and Akosua Amo-Adem. Bill's lawyer (Torri Higginson in a jewel of a performance, i.e. hard and glittering) confesses to her old friend Judy, a little too artlessly, that she dallied with Bill in the front seat of his car. Bill's mother (Nicola Lipman, excellent too) tries to persuade her daughter-in-law that boys will be boys. Most devastating of all is Maria Vaccratsis as the family maid, silently judgmental and shortly unaffordable.

Judy has a lot to put up with; she also has the moral high ground. Despite these circumstances, or maybe because of them, she isn't sympathetic, in either sense of the word; and Martha Burns admirably refrains from trying to make her so. She simply, and sharply, states her case. In Act Two Bill, professionally down and domestically out, states his, at length; and it's a fascinating mix of self-pity, self-loathing, and self-justification. Some of what he says is sensible, but none of it is likeable; Paul Gross' performance, his best stage work that I've seen, is as unsparing as it's eloquent. He has an especially bruising encounter with a transsexual (Salvatore Antonio, icily disdainful) who might be counted as the only other male character in the

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play, though he/she might disagree.

His most painful scene of all, though, is a date with his two daughters in a cafe, at which he says, and orders, all the wrong things. Kelly McNamee embodies pitiless teenage scorn; Abigail Pew says nothing, again. She does, however, speak between scenes, delivering a class assignment on mating habits in the animal kingdom, the male increasingly dispensable as the examples pile up. This, though, is one of those framing devices that outstay their welcome: a case of an author having an idea and being stuck with it. The play, in general, is less tight than *Clybourne Park*, even while painting a smaller canvas; the traps it sets for its characters are less consummately sprung. Overall, though, it's a brilliant piece of mercilessly serious comedy; and the production, on Nick Blais' elegant and economic set, gets it absolutely right. Near the end Bill and Judy, after exhaustively and explicitly rehashing their marital problems in and out of bed, show some small signs of getting back together again. The play's greatest distinction may be that, against all the accustomed rules of audience response, we fervently hope that we won't.