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Owned

nytheatre.com review by Steven Cherry

April 29, 2013

Owned, at the TBG Theatre until May 11th, is a three-person play about the dark space at the intersection of ambition, lust, and friendship. It's a good play, though in some ways it's not dark enough.

Ed and Ray are bartenders at a not-quite-a-dive bar in an unnamed city or town. They've worked for the owner (an unseen character we know only as the other end of on-stage phone calls) for a number of years, and they now hear that the bar may be up for sale. Each of them wants to buy it. Alone. And then, in walks a dame.

One of the things that works best in this play is the characterization of the two as men who know each other all too well and still feel great affection for one another—an affection that finds its limits when neither wants the other as a business partner.

Ed, the introvert who knows how to run the business of a bar, and Ray, the extrovert who knows how to bring customers in and keep them happy, are different enough that they would complement one another as co-owners. And they're enough alike to get along just fine when all is going well. They even drink the same liquor when they're happy and the same beer when they're sad. Unfortunately, they also have much the same taste in women. Or rather, a woman—Morgan, the play's third character.

If that sounds like a classic noir plot, it is. And a bar is a great setting for noir. (And the set for the bar is terrific, down to the ancient "Old Milwaukee" sign and dart boards.) But the characters are modern 30somethings, and not in a neo-noir way. There's no crime, for one thing. And in fact, the story isn't very dark at all—a few bad things seem to have happened in the backstory, but in the actual story, nothing very bad happens to anyone—and there are no consequences where the story sets you up for them.

Which leads to the hole in the heart of this otherwise thoroughly enjoyable play. The plot gets caught up in its own complications by the third act, which is only a minor problem until the complications turn into an outright contradiction. The protagonist, to the extent that one emerges, needs to be innocent of wrongdoing, for the other characters to be responsible for their own fates—but guilty of screwing the others, in order to be the active protagonist the play needs.

The contradiction doesn't prevent the audience from enjoying the smart and clever dialogue through which three equally smart, clever, and attractive characters are defined and the backstory is revealed. There were a half dozen lines that required momentary pauses while the audience collectively laughed. The acting was

spot on, from Don DiPaolo's (Ed) all-too-smooth palaver to Neil Holland's ability to talk his way *out* of success, to Morgan's canny coquettishness.

If, afterward, as you're talking about the play, you figure out what about it threw you off, as well as all the things about it you enjoyed, that is, after all, not such a bad thing. Needless to say, my theatre companion and I had that conversation over a couple of beers at a nearby bar.

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