

The Prairie Plays

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Be warned: the events described in *The Prairie Plays*—especially the second one, *My Daughter Keeps Our Hammer*—are disturbingly violent and gruesome. Playwright Brian Watkins reminds us that the pen can indeed be mightier than the sword, and what has come out of his pen (or, more likely, his keyboard) can be really tough to listen to: I haven't had such a visceral urge to clap my hands over my ears in a theatre since I saw Neil LaBute's *bash* years ago.

This is, Watkins notes in the program, a study of violence. It's a pairing of *High Plains*, a solo play that Watkins premiered in the 2009 New York International Fringe Festival and performs himself, and *Daughter*, a newer companion piece which, he tells us, is still under development. *High Plains* is therefore and not surprisingly by far the more accomplished and polished part of the evening. In it, a young man, seated in a chair with a couple of beer bottles along one side and a pair of crutches on the other, tells us how he happened to arrive in the obscure Colorado town of Ault. I think he's in a bar or some other public location, confiding in whatever stranger will listen (though my companion believed him to be in a more abstract limbo-ish sort of place; I'm not sure it ultimately matters and the ambiguity definitely works in the piece's favor).

The tale that Jake—for that is this young man's name—shares with us is vivid and affecting and sometimes a little scary, in the way that ghost stories told around a campfire can be. I don't want to give too much away about it: it involves Jake's older brother, a young woman whom both brothers took an interest in, and a secret from the brothers' childhood that has haunted both of them in very different ways. Watkins makes the character engaging, even likeable, though the more we learn about him the more we will be inclined to pull away—in this aspect, *High Plains* succeeds brilliantly in reminding us of the dark pools that reside within each and every one of us. Under the taut and expert direction of Anthony Reimer, Watkins delivers a terrific performance; he holds our attention for 45 minutes without even getting up from the chair.

The promise of *High Plains* is not equaled in *My Daughter Keeps Our Hammer*, though. Here, Watkins gives us two characters, Hannah, a waitress at a diner in another desolate Colorado prairie town (not unlike Ault), and her older sister Sarah, who is the caretaker for their elderly invalid mother. A key problem that I had in engaging with this play is that it was never clear to me where the sisters are supposed to be, or who they think they are talking to as they narrate their own complimentary and interlocking versions of the awful crime that they inadvertently perpetrated. This confusion is exacerbated by the fact that the women sometimes simply describe what they did and other times re-enact it. Lacking signposts of a particular reality—the beer bottles and the chair in *High Plains*, for example—*Daughter* meanders off course.

And as it meanders, it gets increasingly upsetting. Again, I don't intend to spoil Watkins's secrets, but I will say that what Sarah and Hannah tell us they did to their mother's favorite sheep is very hard to listen to. Even though I came to understand the desperation that drives them to violence, I found myself recoiling from the play's almost pornographic descriptions of their actions and those actions' aftermath. It's not a spooky *Twilight Zone*-y yarn, and it certainly isn't camp horror à la Martin McDonagh; I left *Daughter* unsure of what Watkins and director Kristin Skye Hoffmann are trying to accomplish with this piece.

Amy Lee Pearsall nonetheless gives a fine performance as Sarah, a portrait of a seemingly ordinary and decent person who suddenly finds herself pushed to the brink of humanity. Katie Schorr's Hannah felt shrill and shallow by comparison, which is perhaps more the fault of the writing than the actor. There are some talented people at work here, but just be aware that *The Prairie Plays* are not for everybody.