

## Review

### Sturdy 'Rainmaker' at ACT survives real jolt from nature

Robert Hurwitt, Chronicle Theater Critic

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Sure, the play is about a major weather event in a western state, but it isn't every production of "The Rainmaker" that opens with an earthquake. It probably won't happen again during the course of the American Conservatory Theater's revival of N. Richard Nash's long-popular 1954 romantic comedy, but it couldn't have been better timed if director Mark Rucker had rehearsed it for weeks.

The curtain had just gone up Tuesday when the building began to shake, Robert Mark Morgan's eye-catching ranch house set trembled under quivering stage lights and the seats shifted uneasily beneath the opening-night audience. Alone onstage, actor Jack Willis seemed so focused on reading a book that he wouldn't notice if the house caught fire, as befits a man about to burn his breakfast. The ceiling of the handsomely renovated and apparently well-retrofitted theater didn't come crashing down, as it did during the Loma Prieta event eight years ago. If anything, the well-timed tremors and Willis' unperturbed focus seemed to rivet attention on the play.

Or perhaps it was just a matter of faith. Nash's tale of the too-long-unmarried rancher's daughter and the sweet-talking con man who shows up during a drought, both real and metaphoric, talks a lot about faith in possible and impossible dreams. It's also so familiar by now - as community theater fodder and in its film (Katharine Hepburn and Burt Lancaster in the roles originated by Geraldine Page and Darren McGavin) and musical ("110 in the Shade," recently revived with Audra McDonald) adaptations - that it's an act of faith on Artistic Director Carey Perloff's part to believe it would spark much interest.

Her bet pays off, at least in terms of Rucker's expertly crafted production and a stage full of beautifully shaped performances. "Rainmaker" isn't exciting or evocative theater, but it's a reasonably well-

structured, lightly comic feel-good drama, even if it runs on a bit long at almost 2 1/2 hours, counting the two intermissions. It isn't likely to stay long in the memory, but the cast makes almost every moment count, to humorous and touching effect.

René Augesen is a smart and achingly yearning, tremulously transparent Lizzie Curry. With her mouth turned down and hair pulled back, Augesen manages to make herself look as plain as Lizzie thinks she is. Her fears radiate through her stoic or joking attempts to hide each successive disappointment, and she's as radiantly intelligent in her tentatively plain-spoken moments with the shy deputy sheriff File as she is dreamily transformed by the pseudo-rainmaker Starbuck.

Willis solidly anchors the household as her tenderly concerned, wise but dumbfounded father. ACT student Alex Morf makes an impressive, crowd-pleasing debut as her impulsive younger brother Jim, in a delightful evolution from cowed buffoon to cocky young man. Stephen Barker Turner is an engaging negative force as the overly practical brother Noah, whose sense of self-worth is wrapped up in keeping a damper on his siblings' hopes.

Those hopes and dreams, and the world of the play, are as limited as the sky seems expansive in Don Darnutzer's painterly lights. Augesen expresses them in the play's most affecting passages, a trembling soliloquy on the dreary prospects of spinsterhood and a sweet paean to domestic tranquility. By contrast, Starbuck's impassioned tributes to impossible dreams are as comic as they are instructive. A fast-talking Geordie Johnson intrudes upon the family like a mini-tornado of overweening self-confidence and con artistry. His Starbuck is attractive high hopes laced with a sleazy edge that makes his growing attachment with Lizzie all the more touching.

Rucker stages it all at an easy, rural lope in Morgan's sharply suggested ranch house, with a windmill and full moon rising above the roof peak and Lydia Tanji's worn rural costumes suggesting a Depression-era time frame. In a clever touch, the kitchen and foyer units slide apart to make way for File's lonely office, where Anthony Fusco delivers a pitch-perfect portrayal of a quietly strong, determinedly self-sufficient man, so hurt in the past that he doesn't realize how lonely he is (with Rod Gnapp in a fine turn as his caring, friendly boss). Fusco's File is so down-to-earth, good-hearted and stymied that we know he's a perfect match for Lizzie long before he or she does.

It all ends well, of course, within the limits Nash sets for his characters. All its talk about faith and

dreams boils down to a sweet tale of the importance of self-esteem.



**The Rainmaker:** Romantic comedy. By N. Richard Nash. Directed by Mark Rucker.  
(Through Nov. 25. American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St., San Francisco. Two hours, 25 minutes. Tickets: \$17-\$82. Call (415) 749-2228 or go to [www.act-sf.org](http://www.act-sf.org)).

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