



Posted Monday, May 21, 2007



*Reviewed by Jose  
Ruiz*

The Ensemble Studio Theatre takes a bold step with this latest offering. With a well-founded sense of self-confidence under their belt, we are presented a work that in lesser hands could be disastrous, but here it comes off as nothing less than inspired.

Don't think this piece is easy to follow. It is not. It dares to take us into the mind and dreams of Franklin, an oddly peculiar young man from a wealthy family who is haunted by childhood images and happens to drift into a carnival where he sees a headless woman and quickly develops a lustful obsession for her. *Headless* makes many demands on its audience. Director Dan Bonnell makes the story jump back and forth in time and in location; he uses the cast as carnival people and brings them as specters of Franklin's dreams and nightmares. You have to pay attention closely and if you do, you'll get caught up in the whirlpool with its uncertainties, its deceptions and its struggle to survive. By the final curtain, you will be out of breath trying to keep up with this thrill ride where every scene is more perversely fascinating and compelling than the last.

People on the fringe of credibility populate this carnival sideshow, including an eight-year-old girl who foretells the future while falling in the grip of convulsions. The headless woman is the child's mother, and has an older daughter by a different man, something the girls often bring up. There is a snake woman suspected of a murder and a chorus of carnival denizens who wander in and out in a bizarre odyssey. Fire plays a major part in the story, in metaphoric depictions and in a literal sense, and a barker shows up frequently telling us, "everybody remembers that day in a different way".

Central to the story is the issue of reality. While carnivals exist on the premise of defying reality (ie – a headless woman), Franklin Bennet's sense of reality is also on shaky ground, while the rest of the characters are also dealing with their own issues that often have them bending their reality for their own comfort.

Jon Beavers and Salli Saffioti are electrifying in their performances. Beavers gives Franklin a borderline demented compulsion in his pursuit of the headless woman, as he struggles with

## *Headless*

### *Electric Lodge - Venice, CA*

demons that alternate from the murderous to the suicidal. There is a nervous uneasiness in his performance, giving a sense that the character lives from second to second, seldom seeing the consequences of his actions. He's like an uncontrolled pinball never knowing where the next bounce will take him. Saffioti immerses herself into the psyche of a love-starved object of his lust, finally giving in to him with a ferocious appetite for satisfaction. There is a raw sexiness to her portrayal, as she growls – screams, stalks and fights back with animal-like passion sensing that her actions may lead to tragic results, yet is attracted to Franklin with erotic wanton desire.

Equally compelling is Natalie Floyd as a Lisa, the teen-age daughter of the Snake woman whose raging teen hormones find a target in an erstwhile reluctant Franklin. Dean Gregory and Tony Pasqualini create carnival characters that are ripped out of the pages of a third rate pulp fiction, in several roles that fill in important story parts. Patty Cornell and Laura Jane Salvato are excellent in their portrayals of carnival people, and the two girls, Kaylin Stewart as China, the eight-year-old fortuneteller who is sometimes scary in her cool matter-of-fact demeanor as she flatly makes ominous statements, and Lauren Clinton as older sister Crystal, mature well beyond her years, seems more in touch with reality than most in the carnival. As usual, the kids manage to usurp the stage from the adults in many scenes, making the actors grateful that at least there are no animals in the story to steal more scenes.

The climactic payoff to the story is not only unexpected – it is the only logical exit for these fanatical characters created by author Lea Floden, captivatingly brought to life by the Ensemble Studio Theatre. The production continues through June 24, 2007 at the Electric Lodge located 1416 Electric Avenue, Venice CA 90201, Reservations at (213) 368-9552.

#### **Pick of the week**