



Recommended: James Roday and Michael Weston In Extinction

By Lauren Gomez

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I have seen two plays in the past month or so. The first, one of the most coveted tickets of the season, was "Streetcar Named Desire" starring Cate Blanchett at The BAM. My husband and I both thought it was awful. The second play, *Extinction*, starring Michael Weston and James Roday, was one of the best productions we've ever seen. [Map The Cherry Lane Theater here, learn more and purchase tickets here. You can also add this location to your GoMet itinerary]

I had been a fan of Ms. Blanchett, and continue to respect her talent, but was disappointed that she was appearing on stage as Blanche and not a character that would highlight her power in more subtle roles. I cringed as the audience ate out of her hand, reacting as if they wanted her to be sure that they, personally, loved her so. Subjects like homosexuality and prostitution that were, during the play's 1947 debut, more shocking to the audience, weren't given new life. My uneasiness continued when I read reviews (like this one), which heaped praise on Blanchett's performance (but how do you really judge a character who is an icon among all-time delusional drama queens?)

Although culture vultures may be, at this point, dismissing my opinion, if you haven't exorcised your laptop yet, bear with me. Without giving away too much about *Extinction*, in hopes that you will enjoy it as we had, I am going to explain why I loved it for everything *Streetcar* wasn't.

No Hype: My tickets to see *Streetcar* inspired jealousy. My tickets to see *Extinction* inspired people to ask what it was. Two for *Streetcar*: over \$200 Two For *Extinction*: Just Over \$100, a bargain for entertainment in New York. *Streetcar* came on the chariot of publicity, heralding an actress that had been awarded for her work many times. *Extinction* arrived in New York with distant word of praise from its run in L.A. and, scant more than a strong review in The New York Times. While the BAM production was like watching Jordan botch a slam dunk, I loved the feeling of walking in with no real expectations and being won over to the point of saying I enjoyed a play, despite some of the violence that ensues within the story.

Genuine Audience Response: James Roday, who is best known as Shawn Spencer on USA Channel's *Psych*, surely has his superfans; I definitely expected more than a few to fill the seats at the Cherry Lane Theater, once again, reacting in hopes that he would hear. Instead, my husband and I were absorbed in the story of Max and Finn, but not to the extent that we didn't notice that the rest of the audience really seemed to be on that journey, too.

Because It Did *Streetcar* Better Than *Streetcar*: I know, big words, but *Streetcar* was boring and this was absolutely not. When you get past what people think they should say about theatre, it's easy, and a relief, to say that. While the stories have many, many differences, they both focus on reunions that inspire recollections, manipulation, regret, and damage. I resent the way that *Streetcar* is treated like sacred text, and the tension that results in the rape that takes place has been, over time, misinterpreted as one of Brando's most sexy moments. That wasn't really contested in the BAM production. On the other hand, it was so impressive to see, in the space of 90 minutes (as opposed to *Street*'s painful 3+hrs), *Extinction* inspire so many emotions—even when they were difficult to confront. On the theater's tiny stage, they reveal a convincing view of a friendship's past and present and succeeded in making us feel invested in the characters.

Because It Works As An Ensemble. Initially, I was inspired to buy tickets for *Extinction* because I'd seen Roday's work on *Psych* and like to support indie theater (the play is presented by Red Dog Squadron, which Roday co-owns and also produced by *Psych* co-star Dule Hill) . That said, I did not expect another iteration of his charming yet precocious character from television. And neither should you. Finn is a serious departure from his character, Shawn. From the look on Roday's face at the curtain call, the transformation required to become Finn, and the energy it took to shake that off to take a bow, was a courageous and jarring one. The play was not a vehicle; the rest of the stage was populated with other actors whose contribution felt vital. It was a privilege to watch Michael Weston indulge in debauchery, verbal thrust and parry, cocky chest thumping, and vulnerability. It felt like an opportunity to see an actor in an intimate setting, on the cusp of a breakthrough. While just a bit too wholesome for her role (which probably makes her better off, off stage), Amanda Detmer delivered humor, pathos, and strength. Stefanie E. Frame was deftly cast as a young woman whose innocence is so clearly being drained with each second spent in that Atlantic City hotel room. The slight twang of her character's mid-Atlantic accent has a perfect, natural sweetness to it that illuminated a past filled with better brighter days and made me desperately hope she could be saved.

Because We Couldn't Stop Talking About It Afterward: Gabe McKinley's play is never contrived conversation on stage and is fertile ground for discussion off. Whether debate surrounds *Extinction*'s climax or whether the aging Pixies indeed *are* a sign our youth is toast, we talked for hours afterward and could for hours more.

In terms of age - the audience for *Streetcar* is also the appropriate audience for *Extinction*. Post-performance, a father gestured to his adolescent sons, whom he clearly thought had seen far too much, and said "Nice move taking the kids." A woman who was presumably his wife said, "We were going to bring *your mother*." So, essentially, don't bring anyone you would feel the need to protect instead of watching, or feel watched by as you watched a play that indulged in some substance use, off color conversation, violence sexual suggestiveness (see, same as *Streetcar*) .If you're in your late twenties/early thirties, edging toward having a pre-mid-life ponderthon and totally got the Pixies thing, come as you are. But do it quickly.

If you want a few more clues than I've given you, read this review, which includes an interview with James Roday. And if you're a BAM member who wants to take it outside, just give me a second to take my earrings off.