

## Extinction

Gabe McKinley's deep-dark comedic drama asks the question: What happens when best friends' paths in life diverge, one leaving the other in the lurch? It is USA Choice Grade A theater in every respect. In addition to its talented playwright and highly assured young director, Wayne Kasserman, *Extinction* benefits from as fine a quartet of young actors as you'll find on any stage. James Roday does absolutely terrific work as a good guy, or at least a guy trying to be good. Michael Weston has the more colorful, volatile role, and he plays it to the hilt, all the while maintaining subtlety and believability. Amanda Detmer and Stefanie E. Frame, both terrific, complete the cast. *Extinction's* design (by Kurt Boetcher and Mike Durst) is, in a word, superb. Anyone in search of edgy, unexpected, quality theater can do no better than to catch *Extinction*.

In Gabe McKinley's deep-dark world premiere comedic drama *Extinction*, now playing at the Elephant Space in Hollywood, it is not an endangered species that faces the end of its days but rather the longtime friendship of Max and Finn, best buds since college. These two 30ish compadres have been spending their vacations together in Atlantic City since their undergrad days, drinking, drugging, and girl-hunting, but as Bob Dylan once put it, "The times they are a-changin'." What happens when best friends' paths in life diverge, one leaving the other in the lurch? Ask yourself this question: How would you react if your closest friend told you that he'd moved on? How far would you go to save this friendship, or failing that, to destroy it forever?



Already at lights up, seeds of discord have been planted. Max (Michael Weston) and Finn (James Roday) have returned to their adjoining hotel rooms, the former pissed off that the latter has walked away from their casino gambling table. "And what was it with your pissant bets?" complains Max, who's not all that happy with his buddy's new facial hair either. "You look like an asshole," he tells him. "No, I mean, your mouth, it looks like an asshole."

It's been fourteen months since the Max and Finn last got together, in Maui. ("I was so drunk," recalls Max, "I started making out with a blind girl.") At least one of the reasons it's taken the friends so long to hang out again is the newly serious turn Finn's life has taken. (He's getting his Ph.D. at Columbia.) They've already drifted far enough apart that Finn didn't even know about Max's mother's death a week ago, but when Finn suggests that maybe that's a reason for them to cancel this weekend, Max protests, "Hell no! Now more than ever!" Besides, his mom was a bitch, he recalls, and only nice to strangers, so fuck it. What better time to get drunk, high, and laid?

While Finn's been hard at work studying (having given up his attempts at writing), Max has been on the road 250 days a year "selling drugs to doctors," a lifestyle which leaves Finn the only friend he's still in contact with. Still, it's obvious from the get-go that whatever these two friends had in common years ago, they've taken very different roads in life. Max can hardly believe it when Finn suggests they check out the Historical Museum, or maybe catch a show. This is Atlantic City, for fuck's sake. What better place than the boardwalk to pick up a couple chicks and bring them back to the hotel for a little wham bang?

At first, though, the two buds watch a little porn (Max: "It's a classic and tragic story") and do a little catching up. Max learns that Finn is \$10,000 in the hole (a bad investment) and that he and his girlfriend are expecting a baby. (Max: "I can't believe this is the first time you got a girl pregnant.") The expectant mother in question is "NYU Susan." (Max: "I think I fucked her once. Only kidding.") Susan's not just a one-night-stand for Finn, he tells Max. He's tired of picking up girls and wants an honest relationship. (Max: "There's nothing honest about monogamy. Monogamy will lead to extinction.") In fact, these changes in Finn's life are coming way too soon for Max. ("We're going to be there soon enough. Let's not try to get there too fast.") Has Finn told Susan about his weekends with Max? (Finn: "We tell each other everything.") So what does all this mean for their friendship? (Finn: "We've changed. I've moved on. You haven't.")

Max and Finn's weekend could easily end on this note, and there would be no *Extinction*, but playwright McKinley has more up his sleeve, much more, and it involves the play's two other characters, Missy (Amanda Detmer) and Victoria (Stefanie E. Frame), who pop up in Max and Finn's rooms about halfway through the play. And that, dear readers, is

as much as I'm going to reveal in this review. Suffice it to say that things will get dark, ugly, and heartbreaking before the night is through.

Despite the darkness, there is considerable humor in McKinley's dialog, as you've probably gathered from the above quotes, or will from the following:

- Max (upon checking out Finn's suitcase): "You can't wear any of this stuff. It's like L.L.Bean puked in your bag."
- Max (referring to New York): "Even the ugliest girl has style."
- Max (about his TV viewing): "I have cable. I'm not a fucking idiot."

There is also considerable understanding about what makes—and breaks—a friendship, and about how far a man will go when he feels he has nothing more to lose.

Extinction is a production of the RED DOG SQUADRON, founded in 1999 by Brad Raider and Roday. Like iama Theatre Company, The Sight Unseen Theatre Group, and VS Theatre Company (to name three others of equal caliber), RED DOG SQUADRON is a troupe of talented, trained young L.A.-based actors committed to bringing quality theater, and particularly quality *original* theater, to Los Angeles.

RED DOG SQUADRON, and Extinction in particular, easily contradict that persistent, mistaken notion that Los Angeles is something other than a quality theater town. In every respect, Extinction is USA Choice Grade A theater.

In addition to its talented playwright and highly assured young director, Wayne Kasserman, Extinction benefits from as fine a quartet of young actors as you'll find on any stage. Three of them are highly successful L.A. film and TV actors with extensive stage background and training, and the fourth is "on loan" from the New York theater scene—and only in Los Angeles would actors of this quality (and career success) do live theater for peanuts, simply because they love it.

Roday, who stars as "Shawn Spencer" on USA Network's Psych, does absolutely terrific work as Finn, a good guy, or at least a guy trying to be good. The actor's work here sneaks up on you, Roday digging deeper and deeper into Finn's psyche, so that his final five minutes are devastating, and earned.

Weston ("Lucas Douglas" on House) has the more colorful, volatile role, and he plays it to the hilt, all the while maintaining subtlety and believability. Ostensibly the "villain" of the piece, Weston makes you understand where Max's insecurities (and the viciousness they provoke) are coming from. By the end of the play's eighty minutes, it's no longer so clear who is right and who is wrong, a tribute (among other things) to Weston's acting.

Detmer's many film and TV roles (most recently as "Morgan Gelman" on Private Practice) have revealed her comedic talents (and girl-next-door prettiness). Here, the NYU MFA grad, shows off her dramatic stuff, creating a young woman who is far more than she appears to be on the surface. Detmer proves a talented, charismatic actress, particularly in her scenes opposite Weston, which positively crackle.

Completing the cast is New York-based Frame, a player of considerable stage presence and talent, and a "likeability" factor that immediately endears her character to the audience, making the play's final scene all the more shattering. Frame is more than welcome to stick around on the West Coast for a while, should she decide to.

Extinction's look is, in a word, superb. Scenic designer Kurt Boetcher, whose work at the Celebration and A Noise Within has already earned him considerable (and deserved) acclaim, outdoes himself here, creating adjoining hotel rooms all in shades of charcoal and black, set at an angle with the upstage room almost hidden behind a scrim save for moments when Mike Durst's lighting reveals it to the audience. Durst lights the set with deliberately harsh overhead bulbs, and footlights which cast highly effective film noirish shadows. Gali Noy's character appropriate costumes complete the sensational design package.

Extinction is the first production I've seen by RED DOG SQUADRON, and my first Gabe McKinley play. Other than Weston, whose stage work I've admired, this is also my introduction to the talented actors on stage. If Extinction is any indication of what I may expect from their future work, it is something to look forward to indeed. Anyone in search of edgy, unexpected, quality theater can do no better than to catch Extinction during its brief run at the Elephant Space. I can guarantee it's a play you'll be talking and thinking about long after the final blackout.