

21M.710 Script Analysis

October 1, 2011

“Next Fall”: A Look at the Production and Characters

Next Fall, written by Geoffrey Nauffts, is a touching play about the five-year-homosexual relationship between two middle-aged men -- Adam, an atheist, and Luke, a devout Christian, the relationship conflicts that came with their different backgrounds in faith, and how an accident involving Luke affected everyone around him. This past Friday, I was fortunate to watch the Speakeasy production of this play as directed by Paul Daigneault with a group of friends at the Boston Center for the Arts. I found the script to be full of humorous dialogue and interesting character relationships, and I thoroughly enjoyed watching the best elements from it brought to life in Daigneault’s interpretation.

When reading the original script, the very first thing we hear is “brakes screeching to a crashing halt, followed by a car horn stuck in plaintive wail”. In the Speakeasy production of the play, the first thing we heard instead was a character saying “In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet, for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed”, while facing us under spotlight at the center of the stage. The lights faded and we were instantly transported to a hospital waiting room illuminated by harsh fluorescent light, with a man and a woman sitting tensely on opposite ends of a couch.

To begin, I found this deviation from the sound cue directions, as written in the script, to be an interesting but effective choice. Although the car horn may have given the onset of the play

a sense of urgency, this less dramatic interpretation was unnerving in its own way. For me, the reason the characters were in the waiting room took longer to sink in -- were they at the hospital for an appointment? Was one of them ill? As three more people -- Arlene, Butch, and finally Adam -- entered the room one-by-one and began to talk, it dawned on us as an audience that these characters had all come to this room because someone named Luke had gotten into a car accident, and they were just as dazed as we were to be there.

It was crucial we understood immediately that we were looking at a waiting room, for this helped set up a general nervousness in the room. The set for the place where these characters were congregated was similar to what I would have imagined the space to look like based on the script -- there was a three-seater couch in the center of the room behind a small coffee table flanked by two one-seater couches on the sides. There were some magazines on a table in the right corner, a small vase of flowers, and a coat rack in the left corner -- all typical of those in the waiting room at a small hospital. If I remember correctly, on the back wall there was a window with white shades that were drawn. The entire room looked very quiet, confined and miserable. Of particular interest were the curtains that were present throughout the play hanging from the sides of the stage -- before the play began, maple leaf shadows were cast onto the curtains indicating the season was autumn, but they were now white hospital curtains.

As we watched Adam, the last character to arrive, become aware of the seriousness of Luke's condition, the set quickly transformed. We were suddenly experiencing nighttime in Manhattan -- the couch had become a garden chair on an apartment rooftop, and the lighting was warmer like that from a porch lamp. As we were introduced to Luke, we learned we were now watching a memory flashback of something that happened in the past -- the first time Adam and

Luke met. Toward the end of the scene Luke began getting closer to Adam and finally asked him out, after which he left the stage through a door. The lighting on Adam turned cold, and Adam was standing in the waiting room once again, in the same spot.

Transitions like these in this play were very important to the playwright -- in his Author's Note, he mentions that it's a "memory play" and transitions should be "seamless" for flashbacks, suggesting never quite letting the waiting room disappear. Originally I thought that if I were to direct the play, I would try to keep Adam onstage during the transitions between memory and waiting room scenes, but as I was watching Daigneault's production I realized that I would also want Adam to leave the stage sometimes to change costumes.

I really enjoyed many of the transitions in the Speakeasy production. At the end of one memory scene, the lights dimmed and the characters walked around in the dark fluidly in seemingly random paths before leaving the stage altogether. They then reassembled quickly onstage as the lighting changed to that of another memory scene. This particular sequence was powerful to me because it evoked the confusion that results sometimes from drifting out of one dream and into another. Some of the transitions were accompanied by dreamy, rhythmic music, at times cheery, at times melancholy. In general, I noticed myself craving Luke's presence the instant transitions were made into scenes where he wasn't onstage (such as those in the waiting room), perhaps in part because of the drearier lighting that resulted whenever he left.

Through a series of similar transitions into and out of flashbacks to the past throughout the play, we witnessed the development of Adam and Luke's relationship from the onset to the moment the "*honeymoon just ended*" (as it is written in the stage directions) and what ultimately

set up the major conflict of the entire play. This was the moment when Adam, an atheist if there ever was one, discovered that Luke was a devout Christian.

ADAM: So you're a what, then...you're -- a...

LUKE: Christian.

ADAM: Okay. *(Tries to proceed with breakfast as usual)*

The actors who played Luke and Adam, Dan Roach and Will McGarrah, respectively, did a wonderful job at capturing both the chemistry and lighthearted banter between these characters, as well as the awkwardness between them as they struggled to find common ground in their faith. From the start, Adam could not understand many of the things Luke believed, choosing to question Luke with extreme questions like:

ADAM: So, then, if Mathew Shepard hadn't accepted Christ before he died, he's in hell, and his killers who, say have, are going heaven? Is that what you are saying?"

As the relationship progressed, Adam learned that he wanted more and more for Luke to embrace their relationship and value it over Luke's relationship with God, without fear or shame. This was manifested in many ways. Adam wanted Luke to introduce him to his Christian parents (Butch and Arlene), who would not approve of his dating a man, and his younger brother, Ben. (Luke responded to this by saying that he would do this once Ben entered college and could begin to make his own decisions.) Adam also became uncomfortable with Luke praying after sex -- so much, in fact, that he decided to talk to Luke's ex-boyfriend, Brandon, to ask for advice.

On the other hand, Luke struggled constantly in the relationship with Adam because it was both a blessing and a sin for him, and he craved approval from God and his parents. Luke wished Adam could believe in God so that he could be more content with his own life, and not

constantly worry about getting thrombosis or brain tumors. However, he wasn't ever really forwardly aggressive in his tactics to convince Adam to believe in God:

LUKE: Is it so wrong for me to want for you to go to heaven? I mean, what's the big fucking deal?

ADAM: Yes, because i don't believe in it, Luke. Not your version...

LUKE: Fine, I'll believe for the both of us.

When I read the script, one of the things that puzzled me was what held the couple together for so long -- five years -- until Adam finally broke it off just before Luke's accident. Similar values and faith are often considered quite fundamental criteria for a healthy long-term relationship; the length of their relationship seemed to suggest the existence of something that kept them together (besides physical attraction -- though Luke did find Adam "cute") through all the doubt and disrespect for each others' beliefs.

The only direct reference that I found in the script to this was during a moment in Scene 4, when Luke and Adam were having yet another conversation about their faith. In the Speakeasy production, this was a particularly intimate moment as Luke was lying on top of Adam and stroking his chin tenderly.

LUKE: You mentioned your soul the night we first met.

ADAM: I did?

LUKE: You said it was fat. That's how I knew we were meant to be...You believe, Adam...that night...I knew that you would one day see. Please, Adam...For me.

This was a reference to something Luke heard Adam tell Holly on the night they met: "My body may not be (fat), but my soul is." The lines above caught my eye as it suggested that Luke initially became attracted to Adam because he saw in Adam the makings of a Christian, and hence had imagined an ideal Adam from the day he met him. Perhaps he had, with or without a

savior complex, begun dating Luke with the hope of eventually watching him come to believe. This added a new dimension to Luke's character for me.

After watching the Speakeasy production, I became convinced that Adam and Luke were both willing to struggle in this relationship so long as they both felt like there was a possibility that the the other person's beliefs would change. In the end, it was Adam who gave up:

ADAM: How long's your brother been at Georgia Tech? He's a sophomore now, right?

LUKE: Uh-huh.

ADAM: It's never going to change, is it? (A beat.)

LUKE. I'm not sure (They sit there a minute longer, one looking more miserable than the other, until Adam rises, grabs his weekend bag, and walks to the door.)

ADAM. I don't think I can do this anymore.

Meanwhile, in the hospital waiting room scenes that alternated with the memory scenes, we witnessed the direct and indirect consequences of the decisions Luke and Adam made in their relationship. During the first half of the play, Luke's prospects for living seemed relatively optimistic and Adam could avoid directly interacting with the other characters, until suddenly Luke's previous boyfriend, Brandon rushed in and said, "Something's changed". The stakes became particularly high in the second half of the play, when it began to dawn on the characters that hope for Luke was steadily diminishing.

In light of this, the script takes a much more introspective and intense turn, and in his grief, Adam finally has no choice but to face Luke's mother Arlene and his father Butch. In the Speakeasy production Arlene told a very personal story about Luke's childhood, in monologue style as scripted, to Adam while both of them sat on a bench facing the audience. The curtains behind them were illuminated with a light that cast maple leaf shadows. After the scene, the

lights were turned off and the same curtains were then used as white hospital curtains as Adam (and we) finally got to see Luke in his hospital bed. This had been arranged for by Brandon, (Luke's ex-boyfriend), even though he and Adam had never been on the best terms. In the hospital room, Adam exploded at Butch when Butch comes in and told him to leave:

Adam: I WANT MORE TIME, ALRIGHT!?! I'M NOT ASKING ANYMORE, I'M TELLING YOU!

Through each of these intense interactions, we slowly came to the realization that the *only reason* all of these characters stayed in that same small room together was because of their shared love for Luke. We watched the characters struggle to face each other and come to terms with their differences in preparation for a grief they knew they would all soon share.

As I was reading the script again it occurred to me that Butch, in comparison to Arlene, had a much harder time accepting things that were different from the way he thought they should be -- such as his son dropping out of law school, or any notion of homosexuality and unmanliness. Luke's mom may have needed drugs to cope, but when Luke died, she chose to seek consolation in asking Holly to retell the story of a play Luke acted in. In any case, she was much more composed than Butch, who until this point had seemed like he was denying the reality of his son's death:

BUTCH: They keep it so damn cold in here. How's anyone supposed to...

ARLENE: Do you want me to go get the pastor?..

BUTCH: The pastor? No I don't think I need a pastor right now.

ARLENE: How about a walk then (...) Just you and me. How about that?

BUTCH: Another blanket...he needs another blanket...

As Butch, the man who believed in manliness, finally collapsed on the floor in grief, it was a poignant playwright's choice to have Adam ultimately be the one to catch Butch's fall and

console him with his words. In that one moment I realized that Next Fall could be seen as simply the story of how six people with very different beliefs dealt with the gradual loss of a loved one by taking comfort in what was similar between themselves: memories of the loved one.

We never really did learn whether Adam started believing in Christ; in the Author's Note the author warned against "redneck behavior and proselytizing", and there doesn't appear to be a clear indication in the script. However, we did see Adam finally picking up a phone call from Luke's brother Ben, facing the audience under spotlight, and saying "My name's Adam" as the lights began fading out -- all in a similar way to how the entire play began.

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