I WILL BE GONE

by Erin Courtney
directed by Kip Fagan

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“Theatre provides a space for meditation, a place to think about things that we don’t have an arena to process in our daily lives,” says playwright Erin Courtney. In her moving, haunting, and often funny new drama, *I Will Be Gone*, Courtney transports us to a small town under the big sky of California’s Sierra Nevada Mountains, whose denizens are muddling through grief and loss and dealing (somewhat awkwardly) with ample evidence of their own impermanence. “I have lost a lot of really excellent, weird people in my life, and at the same time, absent—

I don’t get to make new memories with them. And yet every moment that I’ve shared with them is present in my life and in many other people’s lives. In writing this play, the driving thought was about that presence and absence, and how we eventually accept losing someone—as well as the theatrical question of how to make invisible things present onstage.”

When the play begins, it’s been barely a month since the death of seventeen-year-old Penelope’s mother. Penelope has moved in with her mom’s middle-aged sister, Josephine, in the mountain community where the older generation grew up. It’s a town so tiny that Josephine’s high school ex-boyfriend, Liam, is now the mayor. As the women try to navigate their new situation—and Penelope befriends the punk-rocker boy next door—we learn that everyone in this town is haunted by someone or something. “We behave strangely sometimes when we’re dealing with loss,” notes the playwright, commenting on the humor that springs from her characters’ befuddlement, and from the play’s many surprises. Among those odd occurrences are increasingly pronounced manifestations of the supernatural—for the dead may still be around. Amid apparitions, earthquakes, and the characters’ strange attempts to mourn, the world of the play also starts to become something of a ghost story.

In fact, *I Will Be Gone*’s small town sits near a ghost town that its characters frequent, where abandoned mines and saloons once thrived in the late 19th century during California’s gold rush. “I remembered going to this ghost town called Bodie in the Sierra Nevadas, and it captured my imagination,” says Courtney. “In 1880, Bodie was one of the biggest towns in California, but really quickly, the whole industry faded away. It was declared an official ghost town and historic park in 1962, and no one was allowed to fix anything, but if a structure was starting to fall over, they could prop it up. The town had to be kept in a state of ‘arrested decay.’ When I was a kid, I loved peering into the dusty windows; everything was left the way it had been. In the schoolhouse, you’d see sharpened pencils on the desks, somebody’s glasses, and children’s art on the wall. It’s as if everyone left in a big hurry.”

So while Courtney began her play with the idea of a bereaved woman struggling with her new role as guardian to her niece, this ghost town was also threaded into the play’s DNA. “I thought, I can make a town full of people going through a time of loss they’re not ready to accept. Mirroring the ghost town, they’re clinging to a state of arrested decay.” Courtney observes. “And ghost stories and horror provide a fantastic genre to deal with the things that terrify us; they make manifest something we can’t see.” In addition to memories of Bodie’s eerie atmosphere, Courtney mined her own background to create other dimensions of the play’s theatrical world. Having grown up in Hermosa Beach, California, amid the rise of punk rock bands like the Descendents and Black Flag, she also wove moments of song into the play. “Like humor, music is a great relief,” she says, “something that brings us together in a way that we don’t understand.”

As the inhabitants of *I Will Be Gone* grapple with moving on, both generations face big questions about what their own lives mean in the face of loss. “I think people who are middle-aged and people who are seventeen are both on the verge of change.” Courtney muses. “A teenager is about to embark on a new chapter; someone in her mid-forties is moving to the second half of life, figuring out what to bring along and what to leave behind. The movement of the story is about adapting to change. And realizing that it’s okay that we’re so small, but very much part of a larger universe.” Such revelations may be unsettling, but they can also be oddly reassuring, and Courtney believes the theatre is the ideal realm in which to explore such paradoxical and impossible thoughts. “Theatre is a place where we get to do the thing that we can’t do in real life,” she reflects. “In my real life, I want literal answers and I hate change. But when I go to theatre, what makes me happiest is to watch things that cannot literally happen. To watch a character who is dead and alive at the same time.”

—Amy Wegener