

# East Lynne Company's 'Anna Christie' is theater at its prime

By ED WISMER

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CAPE MAY – The French have a word for everything. As Professor Henry Higgins says, “The French don’t care what they do as long as they pronounce it correctly.” What best describes Eugene O’Neill’s “Anna Christie” is déjà vu, or as Yogi Berra inimitably put it, “déjà vu all over again.”

O’Neill has Anna say “It all seems like I’d been here before, lots of times — on boats in this same fog.”

Fog and the muted sound of foghorns established the air of mystery that permeates “Anna Christie” in the East Lynne Theater Company’s production. Stage manager Lee O’Conner is a master at creating atmosphere and ambience. His choice of Debussy’s “La Mer” to play before the play begins is perfect, and he makes a minimalist approach in props work very nicely and convincingly. Add to the mix a fine cast and excellent direction by East Lynne veteran Mark Edward Lang and it is an unbeatable evening of high drama.

O’Neill’s Pulitzer Prize winning play has a local connection. It had its local tryouts in Atlantic City and Philadelphia.

O’Neill’s story of obsession, abuse and bigotry has had a long and varied history. In its first and failing mode, Anna was played by Lynne Fontaine. In 1930 it was Greta Garbo’s first talking picture. “Anna Christie” deals with subject matter only spoken of in whispers or alluded to obliquely at the time of its writing. It was probably considered shocking back then, but can be considered quaint these days. East Lynne’s cast succeeds in making the dilemmas posed by the play seem contemporary.

Success cannot be measured in terms of onstage time in this show. A perfect example of this is illustrated by Mark Edward Lang. His appearance in the first act, doing double duty as director and effectively creating the character of Johnny, the taciturn and skeptical bartender, is quite effective. The same should be said of Gayle



Katherine Puma (Anna) and Kevin Mahoney (Mat) in "ANNA CHRISTIE"

Stahlhuth’s all-too-brief stint as Marthy. She commits theatrical magic portraying what used to be called an “old rounder” in more innocent times, as do Scott Hinkle and Robert LeMaire. The attention to detail is impressive and therein lies the strength of East Lynne’s production.

Katherine Puma, in the title role, is new to East Lynne and she is a real find. Her more anguish-filled moments could, in less sensitive hands, descend to pure ham, but not with Puma. Her Anna flits from despair to triumph without skipping a beat and Puma’s performance is riveting.

Anna’s father is brought to vivid life by Fred Velde. His Scandinavian accent has a ring of authenticity and his portrayal of a man defeated by his delusions and obsessions is a strong one. His interaction with the other cast members is well-crafted.

Kevin Mahoney must have been exposed to a lot of brogue while growing up and he

obviously absorbed it all. He never drops a false note throughout this very complex role. His Mat Burke is a kaleidoscope of emotional and ethnic complexity. His debut with East Lynne is auspicious. He has the raw animal magnetism that makes him convincing as Anna’s lover.

O’Neill’s play has a substantial running time but never makes the audience restless. The time passes quickly and, for those unfamiliar with the plot, it delivers a full deck of surprises and keeps everyone wondering how it will all end. It is a feather in the caps of all the cast members that they manage to pull it all off.

“Anna Christie” continues through Oct. 16 at Cape May’s Presbyterian Church, Decatur and Hughes Streets. Show time is 8 p.m. I can recommend this one without hesitation. It is prime theater.