

British Theatre Guide

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Lower Ninth

Beau Willimon

Donmar @ Trafalgar Studios

(2010)

The Lower Ninth is a district of New Orleans, downriver of the rest of the city, and also a basin of low-lying land through which the floods that came with Hurricane Katrina in 2005 wreaked havoc. It is here that two guys, Ezekiel (E-Z) and Malcolm are stranded, exposed on a rooftop in the sweltering heat hoping for rescue as they wait for the waters to recede.

Laid on the roof is also the body of Lowboy, a drug dealer whom E-Z has dived into the waters to save.

Ben Stones's set isolates a peculiarly flattened tiled roof, at the front the tip of a dormer window, at the back a telegraph pole crashed into it, and surrounded by a sea of water, shiny black at the audience's feet and disappearing in a blue distance, the top of a wrecked car and other detritus poking from it. There is a great sense of their isolation and exposure with a sequence of short scenes with lighting changes that gives us a sequence of day, sunset, night and dawn and another night of endless waiting, though relying upon the actors to suggest the oppressive heat.

The actors do a splendid job under Charlotte Westenra's direction. Anthony Welsh is E-Z, uncertain of his feelings for Ray Fearson's born-again, bible-thumping Malcolm, a womanising old boyfriend of his dead mother who returned at her request. They go from bantering to a kind of euphoria at their survival, through the tensions and fears of the night, of dehydration and exhaustion and the uncertainty of rescue. Richie Campbell as Lowboy is in a different world and has a different perspective.

Willimon writes dialogue you believe in and gives his characters a natural comic edge: Malcolm caught up in his bible reading and retelling the story of Noah's Flood, E-Z remembering as a boy being left stranded on an island having been left behind when he went off into the woods to take a crap, but his 65-minute play is without clear attitude. How you see this response to the flood will depend on your own beliefs; whether you see the Old Testament as the word of God or do without a deity, you can make your own meaning. E-Z is no friend of Bush or believer in heavenly intervention but, like Malcolm, you may see rescue as being a matter for divine providence.

This production, which opens a twelve-week season by the Donmar at Trafalgar Studios, runs until 23rd October 2010.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)