



Death becomes her: Lentini's 'Drowning in Euphoria'

BY DAVIDA SINGER

Playwright Liza Lentini was reading a lot of Latino plays when she started "Drowning at Euphoria," and she "fell in love with the dream elements and storytelling."

"I began writing this in grad school [Southern Illinois University] in 1995," she recalls. "I always wrote plays, since I was 12. I don't know why. I guess you just have an ear for dialogue, and are fascinated with it. I wrote some really bad plays for a long time. My first one produced was as an undergrad at Wheaton, and I was hooked."

The 26-year-old Bostonian who came to New York two years ago also won the Lillian Hellman prize at Wheaton, and has had about two dozen of her plays produced "in some form." Locally, she's worked with the Women's Project and Expanded Arts.

"Drowning in Euphoria" is Lentini's latest effort, "a family, domestic drama, with a twist to it," she tells me. "Something is definitely off. It's just a bit surreal, like most of my work."

The play first got attention in a workshop run, last January at Expanded Arts. Then it was picked up by the artistic director of Silk Rd. Theatre Company, Sharon Rosen.

"Sharon and I both worked with Playwrights Theatre," explains the writer. "She's also a producer, and had seen some of my work. We talked about it before she went to L.A. last year, and when she returned she saw the show at

Expanded, and told me she wanted to do the play with her company. This is their first New York production. Sharon likes ensemble pieces, which this certainly is."

The plot centers around a young woman (Caroline), who returns to her family's New England beach house on the anniversary of her aunt's drowning. The family has come together because the grandmother is close to death, and according to Lentini, "Caroline is going to confront her relationship with every character in the play, and she actually decides the fate of everyone."

"It's a very short piece, only 70 minutes," she says. "A drama that goes in and out of 'reality.' Everything that happens, every line, is very specific. This puts a tremendous responsibility on the actors, and they've all been champs."

I ask Lentini about the title.

"The play is narrated by the aunt who drowned," she answers. "Something about this is very much a fable. Drowning for this character was easily the best thing that ever happened to her. In the world of the play, all the characters are at very tough places in their lives, and drowning seems like a better alternative. There is a strange comfort in it."

Challenges for the audience?

"'Drowning in Euphoria' is a disturbing piece, but there is clearly something quite positive about how the characters handle death, something strangely triumphant with all of this unpleasantness. I think this is the most challenging writing I've done, partly because of the narrator, in the fact that her story is metaphoric. The play has a lot of potential to not work. There are many scenes with high emotion. On top of it, you add dream elements, and it's a very delicate thing to balance. So both actors and audience members have to just dive right in, and keep moving."

"Drowning in Euphoria," at the McGinn/Gazale Theatre, 2162 Broadway, through June 6, Wed.-Sat., 8 p.m., Sat.-Sun., 3 p.m., call for ticket info., 279-4200.