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THEATER REVIEW

A Depression Diner, Brimming With Danger and Dreams

By NEIL GENZLINGER

Ah, for those carefree Depression days, when bad guys dealt in nice, understandable shoot-'em-ups and strangers could fall hopelessly in love in the time it takes to eat a burger.

An entertaining trip back to that moment is now available for a mere \$15 at the Pantheon Theater, where "The Petrified Forest," Robert E. Sherwood's tale of longing, disillusionment and gunplay, is being given a rare revival that ends this weekend. Neither Leslie Howard nor Humphrey Bogart is on hand for a

reprise of his role from the 1935 Broadway version, but this smoothly acted, briskly paced production does just fine without them.

The play is of the diner-full-of-dreams genre. This diner is in Black Mesa, Ariz., a place where not a lot happens — except on this particular day, when just about everything happens. Alan Squier (Christopher Armond, in the Howard role), an unemployed writer on his way to nowhere from no place, stops in and bums a meal from a waitress named Gabby (Kira Jelincic).

"There is something here that stimulates the autobiographical impulse," Alan muses at one point, and the audience chuckles, because the two have already spilled out their histories and hopes as if they have only two hours to live.

And perhaps they do. Word is drifting in that the notorious outlaw Duke Mantee (Carl Tarcangeli, in Bogart's part) is on the run after doing some serious killing. Guess which roadside joint he stops in? The story plays out with a nice mix of tension, ache and humor, much of the last provided by Gene Burke as a spunky grandpa and Elizabeth Rogers and Richard Springle as a well-off couple who stumble in and create an incongruous domestic disturbance.

You can watch "The Petrified Forest" through any number of filters. Sherwood sprinkled the play with preachy dialogue that reflects the time, and some of it rings interestingly today as we debate loyalty and love of country. There are also moments, when the characters talk about their dreams, that you can't help thinking about what lay ahead for the world in 1935, or what lay ahead for the original production's two principal actors: Bogart seven years away from "Casablanca,"

Howard eight years away from dying when the passenger plane he was in was shot down by the Germans.

But you don't really need any of that baggage; you can just view this for the well-constructed, well-acted tale that it is. Credit George Loros, the director, who seems to know just how tight to keep the reins to prevent his cast from lapsing into parody. "The Petrified Forest" isn't a great play — the story is a bit too improbable for that — but as presented here, it's certainly an enjoyable one.

THE PETRIFIED FOREST

By Robert E. Sherwood; directed by George Loros; sets by Joseph Egan; lighting by Doug Filomena; costumes by Catherine S. Clark; sound by Mario Vaz De Mello. Presented by Pantheon Productions Inc. At the Pantheon Theater, 303 West 42nd Street, second floor, Clinton.

WITH: Vincent LoRusso (Boze Herzlinger), Gene Burke (Gramp Maple), Kira Jelincic (Gabby Maple), Christopher Armond (Alan Squier), Sergio Cacciotti (Jackie), Tyler Reign (Ruby) and Carl Tarcangeli (Duke Mantee).



Stephanie Berger for The New York Times

From left, Tyler Reign, Vincent LoRusso and Sergio Cacciotti in Robert E. Sherwood's "Petrified Forest" at the Pantheon Theater.