



THEATER REVIEW

CRITIC'S CHOICE

A graceful wartime romance

Arlene Hutton's tale of tenuous love smolders with restraint.

By David C. Nichols
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Had Arlene Hutton been around during Broadway's golden age, her finely wrought plays might rank with those of William Inge or Horton Foote. Among postmodern dramatists, Hutton (the pseudonym of actor-director Beth Lincks) stands apart, relying on traditional techniques in an era where such values grow ever rarer.

This restrained old-school care distinguishes "Last Train to Nibroc" at the Crossley Theatre. Hutton's romantic WWII two-hander receives a spare, beautifully judged revival, as quietly enthralling as it is unassuming.

A regional favorite since its 1999 premiere, "Nibroc" is one long act of courtship between two Kentuckians who start out as strangers on a train in 1940. Beneath the vinegary politeness exchanged by disillusioned military fiancée May (Staci Armao) and medically discharged enlistee Raleigh (Gary Clemmer), their attraction is evident. As Hutton jumps time in three ever-deepening episodes, May and Raleigh's future together grows increasingly tenuous yet inevitable, not unlike a nation entering war.

Honest sentiment and pertinence fuels this clash of kindred spirits, and director Nan McNamara cagily locates the delicate tone and astringent humor. Even staging oddities carry emotional punch, as when Raleigh's climactic fit, placed far downstage where most viewers can only hear it, silences the house. Gary Lee Reed's set pieces, Robin Knight's lights and sound designer Lindsay Schnebly's interstitial use of folk songs establish mood with unobtrusive proficiency.

Crucially, actors Armao and Clemmer embody May and Raleigh in perfectly pitched tandem. Her spiky, nervously plain-spoken feeling and his impish, darkly shaded energy are spot-on, played as though both were discovering each insight on the spot. Their memorable teaming and the general respect for Hutton's craft ensure that "Nibroc" takes its achingly lovely journey straight to the heart.