

The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller

Reviewed By:

· Feb 10, 2011 · New York



Aaron Strand, David Brown, Jr. and David King in
The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller
(© Lia Chang)

Jeff Cohen's play *The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller*, now at the Arclight Theater, imagines what might have happened to politician Nelson Rockefeller's 23-year-old anthropologist son, Michael (Aaron Strand), when he disappeared during a trip to New Guinea.

At only 65 minutes, the show -- which is based on Christopher Stokes' short story of the same name -- begs for more time to fully tell its story, but it's still a deeply satisfying and thought-provoking theatrical experience. Cohen shows tremendous skill writing succinct dialogue that's simultaneously cutting and hysterical, and director Alfred Preisser navigates the tonal shifts with aplomb, seamlessly transporting us to the exotic island of New Guinea.

Strand's winning, wide-eyed smile goes a long way to communicate a naive curiosity in a role that's largely spoken in gibberish and non-verbal gestures. The members of the Asmat tribe he's studying, though, speak perfect English. Designing Man (Daniel Morgan Shelley) and Half-Moon Terror (David King) converse casually in a tone that wouldn't be out of place in a Brooklyn coffee shop, and when Michael snaps their picture for the first time, we feel the sharp intrusion of his presence.

It's a brilliant idea (conceived by Stokes) to switch the languages, allowing us into the culture of the tribe. Without this connection, some of their actions (trading wives like furniture and cannibalism for example) would seem primitive and off-putting. Instead, their wonderful vitality and energy shine through during evocative tribal dances supported by Shayshahn MacPherson's powerfully rhythmic music and Kimberly Glennon's intricate costumes.

Humor plays a large part as well. In one scene, Designing Man chastises his wife, Breezy (Ayesha Ngaujah), for playing with a headdress fashioned from his dead father's skull (again). It's treated with such whimsy that we accept this as their custom and view it as a playful lover's quarrel. Shelley and Ngaujah have such great chemistry, it's almost painful to watch them be split apart when Half Moon Terror offers his fertile and pregnant wife, Plentiful Bliss (Tracy Jack), to Designing Man who's yet to conceive.

The Asmats are a very suspicious tribe, and there's a growing belief that Michael's western presence (and Designing Man's contract to make things for him to bring back home) is throwing off the balance of their existence and the Gods are punishing them with infertility. It's the beginning of a slow simmering undertone that something has to be done to correct this balance. The process starts with Designing Man "shaping" Plentiful Bliss' unborn child by doing the things men and women do together in bed. In a darkly funny scene, they go through many positions of "shaping" while Plentiful Bliss tries to convince Designing Man that Michael needs to die.