

Dust Bowl Despair and Duplicity

‘Last Man Club,’ at Axis Theater

LAST MAN'S CLUB Off Broadway, Drama, Play | Closing Date: October 28, 2012 | Axis Theatre, One Sheridan Square | 212-807-9300

By ANITA GATES OCT. 19, 2012



From left, George Demas, Lynn Mancinelli, Brian Barnhart, Spencer Aste, David Crabb and Britt Genelin in "Last Man Club." Dixie Sheridan

When the people at [Axis Theater Company](#) say that “Last Man Club” will make you feel as if you were living through the [Dust Bowl](#) of the 1930s, they are deadly serious. And that is both a compliment and a problem.

This atmospheric, expertly structured one-act drama by Randy Sharp, at the Axis Theater on Sheridan Square, is something of a companion piece to [“The Grapes of Wrath,”](#) in which the Joads leave the drought and dust storms of the Great Plains, hoping to make a new life (and perhaps see the sun again) in California. “Last Man Club” is about the people who stayed behind in their devastated hometowns.

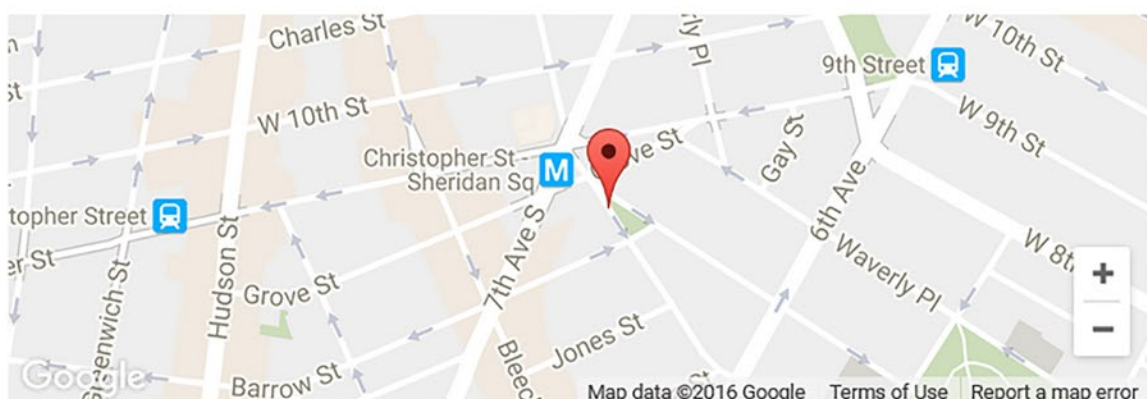
The Dust Bowl illusion is masterly, starting with David Zeffren’s splendid lighting design, in which everyone and everything has a slight sepia tint. Then the sound designer, Steve Fontaine, adds the constant wailing of the wind. And Ms. Sharp has directed some of her six cast members in a stylized way that suggests that they have been spiritually lobotomized by their experience.

The four local residents — played nicely by David Crabb, Lynn Mancinelli, Spencer Aste and Britt Genelin — often seem to be living in a bad dream, and they pull the audience in with them. The production actually does too good a job of recreating the hypnotic feel of that place and time. Periodically Ms. Sharp has an actor shout a line with particular force and volume, possibly to rouse any theatergoers whose eyelids are feeling very heavy.

Then a stranger comes to town, which seems unlikely under these circumstances. In fact, two strangers come to town, separately. Middle Pints (George Demas) — Ms. Sharp loves a distinctive character name — and Henry Taper (Brian Barnhart) have absolutely never met before. (Yeah, right.)

So when Middle reveals the possibility of a machine that could end the drought and therefore everyone’s misery, it certainly adds to his credibility that Henry, a total stranger, thinks investing in it is the best idea since Franklin D. Roosevelt, the current president, repealed Prohibition.

And on that slender but oddly believable premise hangs our story of deception, despair and some surprising aspects of persistent hope. As Pogord (Mr. Aste) says, when others are fantasizing about life after the storms: “Maybe. You never know when something’s going to end.”



Last Man's Club

Axis Theatre
One Sheridan Square
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axiscompany.org

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