

## REVIEWS

### *Last Man Club*

Axis Company offers a deeply unsettling sensory overload in their dark and disturbing play about die-hard survivors of the Dust Bowl.

**Zachary Stewart** • New York City • Mar 11, 2013



Spencer Aste, Britt Genelin, David Crabb, and Lynn Mancinelli in *Last Man Club*.  
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In his 1939 novel *The Grapes of Wrath*, John Steinbeck taught us about the Okies, the Oklahoma farmers who sought refuge in California in the wake of the Dust Bowl, an ecological disaster that hit the American plains in the 1930s, marked by severe drought and violent dust storms. But what about the folks who stayed in Oklahoma and Texas, the "last men?" Who cares about them? Writer/Director Randy Sharp does, and makes us all care too, with her dark and disturbing play, *Last Man Club*, now receiving a second run at the [Axis Theatre](#) after it was ironically blown off course by Hurricane Sandy last fall.

The suffocatingly small and clinical lobby of the Axis Theatre sets the mood for a schizophrenic night of theater, full of sounds and images that may or may not really be there. The brightly-lit stainless steel room is lined with display cases containing only touselled canvas. Where have all the displays gone? When the theater opens, the audience is led into the darkness of the Axis stage, an elliptical space that feels more like a planetarium than an off-off-Broadway theater.

Out of this darkness emerges Major (David Crabb) and his family, a ragtag group of dustbowl diehards who refuse to leave their now-ruined farm for the comforts of California, as their older brother has chosen to do. With bizarre names like "Wishful Hi" (Lynn Mancinelli) and "Saromybride" (Britt Genelin), they're a 20th century *Mother Courage and Her Children*, except the war being fought all around them isn't between Protestants and Catholics, but between nature and man. Two mysterious visitors enter their ramshackle home in the middle of the biggest dust storm ever: a half-dead veteran named Henry Taper (Brian Barnhart) and Middle Pints (George Demas), a businessman from "up north" who claims to have a device that will bring the rain back. They all dig in for the world's driest and most depressing hurricane party, drinking whiskey, singing songs, insulting one another, and hoping that the dust will dissipate and the rain will return.

Crabb gives an inspired performance as Major, subtly conveying the crisis of masculinity that is central to this character. He's simultaneously sustained by his own toughness as a "last man," and crushed by its implications. "How can I help you?" he courteously asks while pointing a double-barrel shotgun at Pints when he first arrives on stage. These are people living in the end times, but still trying to maintain some semblance of dignity and decorum.

Spencer Aste does much to maintain the ever-present uneasiness in the air with his jarring portrayal of the "not quite right in the head" Uncle Pogord. Every line is delivered for maximum awkwardness. Lynn Mancinelli plays Wishful Hi like an overgrown child. Britt Genelin practically throws herself at the visiting men as Saromybride. Is it any wonder that their older brother set out for California after considering the prospect of a dusty and impoverished decade with this bunch?

Randy Sharp has created a supremely disorienting world of spectral visitors appearing out of the dust. And there is so, so much dust. A thick layer of it covers everything on stage and stains the costumes, seemingly irremovable. The theatrical vertigo is aided by Steven Fontaine's muscular sound design, which is present throughout with its howling winds and creaking rusty farm equipment. That sound envelops the audience and keeps you looking over your shoulder, creating a feeling of paranoia very similar to what the characters must be experiencing.

*Last Man Club* is *The Twilight Zone* takes American history, a prairie psychological thriller. It is an unsettling sensory experience that is very much worth the \$20 Axis is charging.