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Review: ‘Light Falls’ is Simon Stephens’ beautiful story, beautifully done at Steep Theatre

By [Chris Jones](#)
Chicago Tribune

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Jul 11, 2022 at 2:30 pm

The unique collaboration between Steep Theatre and the prolific British playwright Simon Stephens, a member of the storefront Chicago theater’s ensemble, have resulted in a years-long streak of unforgettable shows, often with the director Robin Witt at the helm. Steep produced the U.S. premieres of “Harper Reagan,” “Motortown,” “Wastwater” and “Birdland,” as well as other Stephens dramas, such as “Punk Rock” and “On the Shore of the Wide World.” All were intense, gripping experiences.

Given that he won the Tony Award for “The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time” *and* that Tom Sturridge starred in his play “Sea Wall” on Broadway just prior to the pandemic, Stephens’ support of Steep might seem an act of altruism. But not really. Many of these shows have featured the same Chicago actors. Witt has developed enough experience with this writer to become a distinguished stager of his work, most of which explores people struggling for control amid life’s most painful mysteries. Steep, which has used its collective craft to tend to this talent like no other, has given Stephens as much as Stephens has given Steep, and Chicago audiences have been the beneficiaries.

But there was a long break before “Light Falls,” the latest Steep production of a Stephens play, which opened this weekend in borrowed digs at Theater Wit in Chicago’s Lakeview neighborhood. Steep [took a two-year pause](#).

It is unspeakably wonderful to experience this writer, this director and this essential Chicago theater company all back together again.



Kendra Thulin in Steep Theatre's production of "Light Falls." (Randall Starr / HANDOUT)

I should note the play, which deals with death and family, is extremely sad, although that won't come as a surprise if this is not your first Stephens rodeo. I blubbered and sniffled my way through the night, pretty much as soon as the actress Kendra Thulin began the long, riveting opening monologue. I would have drawn attention, perhaps, had the guy two seats over not been sobbing. I suppose that's a warning, but you must know that Stephens' work is not bathetic or exploitative. In fact, he is writing about the losses that come to all of us and, in essence, dramatizing our efforts to ameliorate the future incarnations of them for those we love.

Penned in 2019, the play is prismatic, set across several postindustrial cities in the North of England, where Stephens (and I) were born. They're linked by a recurring song, "The Great North Road," and to some extent Stephens is writing an ode to the stomping grounds of his youth, towns that were neglected as London and its wealthy surroundings pulled resources and attention in the first decades of the 21st century.

He's old enough now to think and write a lot about his past. That's the big divide you see often in the theater. Young scribes tend to want to change the future in 90 minutes; writers of a certain age are dealing with their sticky ghosts. Equally true of critics, I suppose.



Debo Balogun, Susaan Jamshidi, Peter Moore, Stephanie Mattos, Ashlyn Lozano, Brandon Rivera, Cindy Marker, Omer Abbas Salem and Nate Faust in Steep Theatre's production of "Light Falls." (Randall Starr / HANDOUT)

But theater is rooted in mortality, not urbanity, and Stephens thus focuses on people whose familial landscape stretches across these places that have limited opportunity but much human kindness. In the end, this could be set anywhere. Most counties have such towns.

The play begins with a woman describing her own recent death and, gradually, we meet the three adult children (and the husband) she has left behind. You're better watching the plot unravel in real time without me spoiling it for you here but I couldn't get one question out of my head all night, which is whether or not a parent's, an imperfect parent's, worries for their children end with their own death. Surely not. But that's of course entangled with the whole idea of whether we live on in some way and are able to visit the living, an unsolvable mystery that has consumed playwrights since old Thespis, or whomever, played a part.

Witt's production, for the record, is simple, kind and exquisite. This ensemble cast, made up of Thulin, Stephanie Mattos, Nate Faust, Pete Moore, Cindy Marker, Omer Abbas Salem, Brandon Rivera, Tina El Gamal (on the night I saw the show), Ashlyn Lozano and Debo Balogun all are in pretty deep here.

The play wouldn't work without Thulin's character, an alcoholic, being deeply empathetic and she certainly fulfills that role.

But in a really fine collective, Lozano, playing a struggling single mother with a questionable boyfriend (Balogun, wrestling with demons) and a deep hole in the heart, is truly exceptional. Frankly, her work reminded me of Carrie Coon's early work in Chicago theater; it feels like she has been working on this gorgeous role for the longest time, although that's not the only person on stage her for whom that seems true.

Such depth brings rich rewards.

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Review: "Light Falls" (4 stars)