By the Bog of Cats

There were many powerful moments across each of the scenes featured in *By the Bog of Cats*. Like good theater does, each moment served a purpose and either built upon our understanding of the characters present or showed them develop in a new way. While the character of Hester Swane was a very dynamic and bold character from start to finish, I think a lot of her shortcomings bled through to us in the scene where the array of characters come to convince her to leave before the wedding takes place. At this point, all she wants is her love back and at the very least to keep the place she knew as her home. Before the build up to here, we see Hester mainly as a strong personality that didn’t really bend. She knew what she had, knew what she wanted, and would not back down from a fight. That changed for the first time when Carthage finally came around. The strong walls we saw broke down as she went from distant and independent to up close and pleading to Carthage, trying to leverage their history and guilt him into changing his mind so she may stay, or that he will return to love her instead. This was primarily interesting in the moment not only because the character interactions built upon the world, but it showed that she does have a desperate and insecure side- a strong contrast to the portrayal up to that point, but not in a way that betrayed who we knew the character to be. It became doubling in power when Caroline came into the picture. She reverted back to her collected nature and played it as if she held the cards to the game and was confident she would get what she wants. As the audience, we witness everything, so while Caroline knows no better, it is extremely telling to us when we see her use the same lines
Carthage said to her, and for her to flip the scenario as if the roles were reversed (claiming Carthage begged for her back). In that, we see the deep insecurity of Hester and with that how she herself is an actress. The range of emotions and the tactics used by Ellise Chase made Hester Swane become a very complex and deep character, with her own tactics in acting being strong enough to echo into Hester’s.

The example I gave was an example of her behavioral strategies to achieve her objective. She wanted her love and she wanted to stay and she tried to use tactics to spurn guilt or doubt in the interacting characters to work towards the possibility of changing somebody’s mind who could grant her the home she wanted to keep. Ellise used a variety of vocal variations, controlled blocking, and bodily expression to live as Hester in her moments of desperate manipulation. I completely agree with the actions Ellise chose to use in her work. I felt all of the actions she took to convey the character in pursuit of her goals throughout were always very appropriate. I do not think there is any point where I could imagine I would have acted any different to achieve the outcomes she had. I do believe that it was very much performed completely and truthfully from moment to moment. Who Hester appeared to be through Ellise’s portrayal felt like it matched the plot shown to us and feels real to how someone would behave in her given circumstances. Following the concept of given circumstances, I think the “magic if” was one of the more present acting techniques we have reviewed. It did feel at all times like how a person would respond if they were in that situation. For that reason, Hester Swane was very real.

To me, Ellise Chase’s portrayal of Hester Swane was very believable. Voice and vocal choices really drove the character and defined who she was to me from the start. Above all, Hester was attitude. She was loud, bold, and adamant. From our first meeting of the character, Ellise was able to show us who Hester was with her distancing from other characters, strong voice, and
relentless attitude to those encroaching on her space. The aspects of body and engagement of space very much played together in this portrayal. Just as the voice built the surface impression of who we knew Hester to be, her physical choices added onto it and gave more depth. Ellise was very meticulous in her blocking. She was often keeping distance between herself and the other characters to build up the understanding she was different and for the most part did not like them. She kept distance to demonstrate Hester’s desire to just be left alone. Ellise gave Hester good posture which added to our impression of Hester as being a strong, confident figure. Just as that built her to confirm what her vocal choices had established, it also in critical moments gave us jarring contrast to see the real depth behind the characters. Her earlier distance gave more meaning to her then later clinging to Carthage while pleading or being close with Josie. After the bird to open the play, she does not interact with props all too often. Citable examples of when she does however do well in conveying her tactics again. A recurring prop is the money. Her lack of attention to it and willingness to throw it around show that it is meaningless to the character and re-enforce our understanding of her values. Her other prop interaction was with Xavier and his gun. With her at her breaking point, we see her take hold of the gun and seemingly prime it in the ways to kill her, showing how Hester no longer cared to live. That idea was also conveyed through her proximity to him. She no longer cared to keep distance for the sake of her safety. Her choices were deliberate and they were effective in helping us see the negative character arc of Hester.

There weren’t many flaws in the performance of Ellise Chase as Hester Swane. She displayed a wide range of emotions, and had mostly held consistent with her accent. The key word being “mostly.” It is not meant to be a harsh criticism, but there were a few lines (notably I remember an “anyway” between two larger lines) where the accent dropped into what I would suspect is Ellise’s normal voice. It was not bad, but when the rest of the performance is spotlight,
you cannot help but notice the drop, it is jarring to swiftly translate from the lighter but staccato nature of the accent to the louder smoother nature of our casual and back. The slips broke immersion, but they didn’t hurt the show. It actually made it more impressive in the moment to see the contrast between who the actors are and who they become in the act. While it momentarily breaks immersion, it just draws attention to how impressive it is that they can be so precise in their mannerisms in every other moment. Ellise otherwise was a very consistent and expressive actress that did fantastic in portraying the complex variety and wide range of emotions demanded by the character of Hester. Her mannerisms were consistent to her character and made it very believable. As a personal quirk, I also found her character more believable than others because I recognized several actors from previous shows like *Titus Andronicus* and *Vinegar Tom*. Overall, the entire cast did phenomenally in keeping their accents consistent to each other, their mannerisms consistent to themselves, their expressions grand to convey the dynamic natures of all characters, and their composure when there were some slip ups in lines.

On a note of the play, the only things that I really would prefer were different were to not feature the use of the camera and mentioning of astronauts. The costuming, accents, props, and characterization, and plot built me to perceive a non-modern setting, maybe mid 1800s Europe (approximately the time of the Salem witch trials in America), yet then the camera and astronaut as small details immediately shot the story at least a century later which just felt odd given they didn’t even seem to live in a world with electricity. If it were not for those small details that were inconsequential to the rest of the story, I would have never began to thing the setting time-wise was anything remotely close.