

NOVEMBER 16, 2007

## Beautiful Ashes at UT

*Ashes, Ashes*, closing this weekend at UT, is the most visually-impressive theatrical work we've seen anywhere in quite awhile. We've even been to lower-end Broadway productions that didn't have half the visual whammy of this retro-futuristic extravaganza. We simply couldn't tear our eyes away from the post-Victorian steampunk fantasia created by the show's scenic design ([Lisa Laratta](#)) and costume design ([Sarah Mosher](#)). As director [Dustin Wills](#) states in the program, "The design of the show rummages through the imagination (a hint of absurd, a dash of reality) yet still remains tangible."

This tale of a town cut off from the sun by industrial pollution captivated our eyes from the moment we walked onto the stage at UT's B. Iden Payne Theatre. Yep, that's right, walked *onto* the stage. Instead of the venue's usual proscenium theater configuration (with an audience watching actors on a raised stage), the stage itself has been turned into a theater-in-the-round. Good choice! We've always found the cavernous B. Iden completely overwhelming for most of the student productions mounted there.



Photo of Emily Tindall and Leslie Chastain courtesy UT Dep't Theatre & Dance

### Ashes, Ashes

8pm Saturday, 2pm Sunday  
Winship Drama Building (UT Campus)  
[\[info\]](#) | [\[tickets\]](#)

To enter the theater, we came in through the wings and sat in chairs on risers ringing the perimeter of the stage. An almost-curtain anchored the space above and around the seating of the ad-hoc configuration, making the space seem more intimate. Actors went around and underneath the section of risers where we were sitting, making us feel like we were practically part of the show. We like intimacy, so we were down with that.

When the show started, the lights went off and actors emerged with lighting devices strapped to their heads. Mother ([Kristin Leahey](#)), for example, had a fetchingly feminine desk lamp as headwear. While we like to see faces—and mostly couldn't because of the first scene being so dark—we were enchanted by the whimsical lighting. So, kudos to lighting designer [Paul Hancock](#).

The play tells the story of Nini ([Emily Tindall](#)) a little girl growing up in this harsh place. It's a place that when you die, your name is taken away from the people that loved you, under the theory that it's better to forget about the past. You literally can't speak their names, even if you want to. All that comes out is a squeak.

Nini's takes a journey to rescue the name of someone she loved—a name that has been forcibly taken from her and thrown down the "hole" after her beloved's demise. Nini follows, down the "hole" to the underworld, via an amazing and enchanting fabric vortex that rises from the floor to the fly-space. She does a little flying herself to get there.

Alas, while we absolutely loved the design of the show—and we thought the chorus totally rocked—we can't say that we were captivated by the story. Sitting in a top-row back corner of the rectangle, we occasionally had a hard time hearing everything that was going on. That made us feel left-out, sad and not so connected to the story.

[Eve Tulbert](#), a recent graduate of the MFA program in Drama & Theatre for Youth at UT, wrote *Ashes*. According to the program, director Wills has been involved with *Ashes* from the initial drafts. And while we applaud the University's decision to produce new works, we just weren't crazy about this one. Try as we might, we couldn't become emotionally invested in the play, the characters, or in Nini's journey to recover a beloved name.

We're told *Ashes* is targeted towards fourth and fifth graders, but being a touch older than the target demographic, we're not sure how well that really works. If it was too dialogue-heavy for us, might it not be overly wordy for the younger set? Then again, those crazy kids today are happily scarfing down the extra-wordy multi-volume Harry Potter series, so maybe the show works well for the wee-er ones.

Further, note well: anyone who cares about visual innovation in theater must, must, must go see this show. Our companion, not having read the program, wondered if the design for *Ashes* was original, or if it had been lifted straight from the show's (non-existent) Broadway production! So we really must give everyone associated with the look of this show a big wet smoochie for providing our eyes with such happiness. That's how yummy it is. See this show, just for the joy of the seeing!

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