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THEATER REVIEWS

***Disaster* makes a powerful landfall**

A Disaster Begins is one of the most original and intriguing solo theater pieces of recent years.

Making its premier at DiverseWorks, *Disaster* begins deceptively, as a purported lecture on the 1900 Galveston Hurricane, which claimed 6,000 lives. Yet it soon becomes clear that the show is using that topic to launch multifaceted reflections on the origin and aftermath of disasters, whether of nature or of family history, and on the relationship of storyteller to audience.

The content shrewdly plays on the resonance of more recent disasters. Is the fictitious lecturer a figure out of time addressing us in our own? Or have we been transported back to 1900?

The show also works with an ironic capsule history of colonizing forces that fought to own Texas, how arbitrarily they rearranged its borders and disposed of the area's indigenous peoples.

Disaster is written and directed by three-time Obie winner Ain Gordon who has won acclaim from New York's Public Theater to Los Angeles' Mark Taper Forum.

It's performed by Veanne Cox, an outstanding actress with notable Broadway, off-Broadway and regional credits—from musicals like *Company* and *Caroline, or Change*, to plays from Shakespeare to Nicky Silver. She won a 2008 career Obie for "Sustained Excellence". I confess I've been a fan since seeing her star in the terrific 1987 off-Broadway revival of Kander and Ebb's *Flora the Red Menace*. Yet I think anyone seeing her for the first time would agree Cox is marvelous in *Disaster*.

With her hair pulled back in a tight bun, attired in schoolmarm-ish grey skirt & jacket, Cox unveils a personality likewise tied in a knot. As the author of a book about a storm, she's there to explain it—but can't because of the myriad tangents attached to any disaster. The show turns out not to be a lecture the author intends to give, but its deconstruction.

Cox deftly conveys conflicting impulses: eager yet hesitant, determined to convey her point while throwing up her hands in exasperation of finding the means to do so. She radiates shy charm, and wry humor, shining through plain-faced desperation. Gordon's Staging bolsters her work, with such ideal touches as the move that punctuates her description of total deluge.

Disaster's musing sat times seem scattershot, and I'm not sure the ending is quite right.

But it takes chutzpah to put "disaster" in the title of a play. And this one (which next plays Oct 9-17 at New York's HERE Arts Center) has the smarts and skill to emerge as a little triumph.