There’s no moon in the newest version of *A Moon for the Misbegotten*. The set, designed by Andrew Thompson, looks great, but because the ceiling of the Independence Studio on the Walnut Street Theatre’s third floor is so low, there’s no space to show a moon shining over the characters.

But don’t worry. Even without a moon, this show glows. And so do the actors, who bring Eugene O’Neill’s play to life with vivid, and often heartbreaking, intensity.

Angela Smith plays Josie Hogan, the hardest working woman to be found on any tenant farm in 1920s Connecticut. Anthony Lawton plays Jim Tyrone, a dissipated Broadway actor who owns the land Josie farms on. Josie sees Jim as her last chance for love; Jim sees Josie as his last chance for redemption. And Josie’s rascally father Phil (Michael P. Toner) sees a marriage between them as his own way out of poverty. So on one long, momentous night in the Hogans’ yard, Josie and Jim, aided by a quart of whiskey and a surfeit of moonlight, open up to each other, tear apart old illusions, relive the pain in Jim’s past and look for a way to put all their agony behind them.

*A Moon for the Misbegotten* is two and a half hours long, but Director Kate Galvin’s production never drags. Galvin creates a satisfying sense of intimacy by having the actors move to the edge of the tiny acting space, delivering speeches just inches from the audience. Even during Jim’s confessional monologue, when his head is buried in Josie’s bosom, he pulls himself out of her embrace and inches toward the audience at crucial moments, confiding his innermost thoughts to the audience.

Lawton’s riveting performance is at the heart of this production. He enters the Hogans’ yard with a swagger, looking snazzy in a tan and maroon three-piece suit, provided by Costume Designer Julia Poiesz. But as the night moves on, and Jim gets drunker and delves deeper into the tragedies of his past, Lawton loses his easygoing smile. Becoming more and more glassy-eyed, he looks into the void and finds no way out – and his anguished cries and expressions allow the audience to feel his suffering.

Smith seemed a bit agitated during the early scenes on opening night; at a few points she jumped in early and cut off Toner’s lines. And she didn’t dominate during her moments with Lawton, letting him lead the way while she reacted to him. But she gained power as the night went on, her soothing presence an effective contrast to Lawton’s distress. Smith makes an excellent Josie. Her encounters with Lawton are graceful and affecting.

Toner’s spirited performance as the ornery, earthy Phil Hogan feels genuine in every detail, from the impish glint in his eyes to the Irish brogue on his tongue (he pronounces floor as “flew-or”). This is Toner’s first play since he suffered a debilitating accident last year, and it’s wonderful to see this treasured actor back on the stage and performing with such gusto.

The actors play off each other well, and that’s especially clear in the comedic moment in Act One in which Josie and company taunt their upper-crust neighbor (Foreman again, delightfully arrogant). It’s done with lots of joy and energy, and earns big laughs. And even though this is the fourth *Moon* I’ve seen, it’s the first where one actor has played both the brother and the neighbor. It’s such an astute move that I’m surprised I haven’t seen it before.

Dominic Chacon’s evocative lighting sets the right romantic mood. It contributes immeasurably to this deeply satisfying take on a very special play.