

Death by Three

Theatre Society dies on stage...well

Euthanasia, the angel of death and fatal domestic violence...doesn't exactly sound like a recipe for a fun evening, does it? Still, the UPEI Theatre Society managed to take these ingredients and whip up a tasty theatrical dish with their "Death by Three"

production, a presentation of three one-act plays: "The Waiting Room", Edward Albee's "The Sandbox", and A.R. Gurney's "The Golden Fleece".

First on the agenda was "The Waiting Room", written by Sharon Leighton, who also directed the play for this production. Leighton's play, which won the P.E.I. New Voices playwrights' competition, deals with the controversial subject of euthanasia. The setting is

the near-future, a time in which euthanasia, like abortion, has been legalized. The story unfolds in the "waiting room" of a euthanasia clinic, wherein four people await their date with death. As they wait, the foursome discuss what reasons they have to die, and, after some soul-searching, what reasons they have to live. Their personal battles combine to illustrate the larger moral dilemma of euthanasia.

Leighton's script is compact and direct. The characters and issues are portrayed clearly, but not simplistically. More impressively, Leighton confronts a disturbing and contentious issue with frankness and courage. The story is a reaffirmation, if not a celebration, of life-as seen by people on the threshold of death. Some of the prospective euthanasia subjects rationalize their decision to die on the grounds of economic realities, practicality, fear, pain, and even convenience- disturbingly common rationales for suicide. Hearing these ideas said with such directness and conviction brings home the stark reality of their madness, as apparent and repugnant as blood splattered on glass. The arguments for and against euthanasia herein are very balanced, but the playwright is not afraid to make a statement. Our increasingly laissez-faire society seldom has the courage to speak up when the emperor has no clothes, but Leighton exposes the naked truth of the voluntary euthanasia depicted in her play- weakness, selfishness, cowardice- suicide by any other name.

The performance itself was quite good. The first three actors on stage seemed to have trouble relaxing with their parts at first, and the opening seemed slow and tentative; however, the actors all opened up more as the play progressed. Keir Malone sparks some of this

energy as the irascible Mr. Way, a terminally ill, elderly man who clings stubbornly to life- his performance is sometimes one-noted, but has an energy that gives Malone some of the better (and more amusing) moments of the play. Other memorable moments come from Jerome

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(Craig Ramsey), a morbid young man whose fascination with death has (ostensibly) led him to the euthanasia clinic. His sardonic, morbid wit puts a perverse spin on the proceedings and forces the other characters to confront the unpleasant realities of the situation. Ramsey delivers a fine performance, though he sometimes shows brief flashes of tentativeness (an initial preoccupation with his prop magazine beyond any dramatic function, for instance) and self-consciousness, and he and Malone both occasionally anticipate their cues. While Ramsey and Malone have some of the best moments, the most consistently solid performance herein is that of Jennifer MacDonald as Emily, a tortured young woman who seeks suicide when her husband tries to force her to have an abortion; MacDonald brings vitality and pathos to her role throughout the proceedings. Carolyn Whelan is competent albeit inconsistent as Mrs. Clark, while Catherine Timmons is rather wooden in the role of Mr. Way's domineering nurse, Ms. Brunton.

Next on the program (and perhaps the best play of the night), was "The Sandbox". Director Craig Blair and stage manager David Winter are to be commended for such a polished, artistic interpretation of Albee's minor masterwork; the set and costuming are appropriate to the starkly ambiguous mood, and there are beautiful touches: the well-timed and very ominous rumbling of the death-angel's wings comes to mind, as does the unobtrusive clarinet-player's (Kadre Kass's) eclectic repertoire of background music (Send in the Clowns, As Time Goes By, etc.).

Performances are excellent here, with the possible exception of Mommy (Rebecca Van

Der Heyden), whose over-acting hinders the subtlety of the play's absurdity. This one false note strains the viewer's suspension of disbelief, which is so essential to the play. Still, Van Der Heyden does a creditable job, and in her defense the overacting was purportedly under instructions from the director. At any rate, it is a very minor weakness in such a solid cast: Jennifer Godfrey is superb as Grandma, bringing a great deal of humour and humanity to her role, and Sean McIntyre usually manages to produce the right mixture of deadpan and goofy amiability in his role as the Young Man. Phillip MacEachern rounds out the cast capably as the

ineffectual, vapid Daddy.

The third production of the evening was "The Golden Fleece", running neck-and-neck with "The Sandbox" for the best show of the evening. Craig Blair (as Bill) and Janet MacDonald (as Betty) excel in their roles as the married couple who live vicariously through the glamorous lives of their friends, Jason and Medea (the infamous spousal duo of mythological fame, transplanted

to a 1960's setting). Both Blair and MacDonald bring elements of humour, the disturbing, and, most importantly, believability to the parts they play. Blair, a veteran of the Theatre Society productions, seems to improve with each subsequent outing. The Theatre Society productions as a whole, for that matter, have been consistently better since the less than resoundingly successful one-act plays with which the Society began its season last year. In this latest series of one-act plays, the Society has succeeded admirably in bringing an evening of death to life.

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