

No Sugar Coating in “The Gin Game”



Written by Cathy Shane

Thursday, July 19, 2007

BLUE HILL — An elderly woman lightly rested her hand on Director Bill Raiten’s arm after The New Surry Theater’s opening performance of “The Gin Game.”

“That was very sad,” she said.



Dindy Royster (left) plays Fonsia Dorsey and John Chapin plays Weller Martin in NST’s production of “The Gin Game.”—STAFF PHOTO BY CATHY SHANE

D.L. Coburn’s “The Gin Game,” showing until Aug. 10, is a play that is not for the faint of heart. What begins as a quirky comedy about two elderly people turns into a play that draws the curtain on the subject of life in nursing homes, revealing precisely what society doesn’t want to admit is often the truth: That it can be positively miserable for its residents.

The gutsy move to express such a dismal scene is what makes this 1978 Pulitzer Prize-winning play so significant — because it’s honest. Nothing is sugar-coated here. Only truthful, bold facts about two characters who have nothing else but the rest of their days to confront

issues of their past, present and impending death.

The play is set in 1977 and begins on a lighter note. The two characters, Weller Martin (John Chapin) and Fonsia Dorsey (Dindy Royster) meet on the porch of the nursing home. Although Fonsia walks onto the porch crying, her fellow resident, who is playing a card game alone, quickly cheers her up.

The two discover that they both like to play the card game gin rummy and before long are laying down cards while chatting about themselves. At first, the play seems to be something of a comedy, where the humor lies in the quirky ways of the elderly.

This initial companionship between the two lonely residents — searching for any sort of interaction beyond a nurse and a daily dose of pills — is what will end up breaking a person's heart. It doesn't last, like the fun in the card game doesn't last.

Chapin and Royster, the married acting team who play the two characters, create a relationship that seems so sweet at first, only to turn toxic quickly. Weller, eventually loses so many gin rummies, he reveals his temper and explodes at Fonsia, who wins every time despite her claim that she is an amateur.

Royster as Fonsia conveys an old woman who doesn't take orders, yet she gives in each time to Weller's foolish temper which forces her to play again. Each game ends in Weller's anger and Fonsia's initial reluctance to play again — and yet the two characters do play again. They repeat the same bitter episode over and over, causing them to be consistently unhappy.

Chapin really deserves applause for his portrayal of Weller. His ability to portray such a competitive, crotchety old man, who roughly plays the game, slamming cards and verbally abusing Fonsia (cursing at her and even calling her a witch), shows his level of talent. It's acting that forces the audience to feel a range of emotions, including discomfort. The play's spectators will fear for Fonsia's safety when Weller is really pushed into a rage, flipping over the card table in one scene and beating the chair and table with his cane in another. At these moments, you'll hold your breath.

The set design and construction by Kenny Weinberg and Frank John echoes the theme of abandonment, adding to the play's sense of reality. The porch looks rundown with weatherworn wicker chairs, old pots and neglected books. Other effects include sounds from an old, black and white TV that can be seen through the porch's window (inside the nursing home) and real water (rain) that leaks onto the porch during a storm.

The costume design, done by Elena Bourakovsky, is precisely how an elderly man and woman would dress, right down to Fonsia's hairnet in the first scene. In fact, the costume emphasizes how the play yanks its audience's perspective from a romantic play to a depressing one. The shift from casual clothing in the first scene (bathrobes and slippers) to more dressy items (Fonsia's dresses and Weller's dress slacks) hints that there may be some sort of elderly attraction, where the two dress-up for one another. However, the audience quickly discovers that romance will be the last thing that happens between these two characters.

The play ends on a note of sorrow. This performance is well executed because it's difficult to watch, which is precisely this play's intention: to expose the dark, depressing side of nursing homes, one that society often chooses to turn a blind eye and deaf ear to. If it does nothing else, this performance is a wake up call to its audience about reality as we age.

Kudos to Raiten and the rest of the production team for bringing such a performance to the Blue Hill. It's obvious why this play won a Pulitzer Prize. It's absolutely powerful.

Performances of "The Gin Game" are July 20, 21, 22, 28, Aug. 3, 5 and 10. For tickets, call 374-5556 or visit newsurrytheatre.org.