

Yes! New Surry Theater strikes gold

By Nan Lincoln

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BLUE HILL (Jan 21): Community theater at its best will be returning to the Grand this weekend when Bill Raiten's New Surry Theater brings its excellent production of the play "On Golden Pond" to that venerable venue.

This production, which has played the last two weekends in Blue Hill, has all the qualities an audience could hope to expect from an amateur theater production.

First of all, the play. Ernest Thompson's poignant, funny, timeless take on a summer in the lives of an elderly couple, Norman and Ethel Thayer, at their lakeside cottage in Maine, is the perfect choice for a small ensemble of actors. The play is relevant in so many aspects for local audiences, with its theme of navigating the troubled waters of aging — with difficult passages for several generations of the characters in this play. And it's set in a place that is very familiar to us all.

Under a less sure hand, this could have been a drawback, as any detail that did not ring true would have been immediately spotted. But this little theater company, as usual, gets it right.

Then there's the cast. All the actors in this production have at one time or another

been students of Bill Raiten's acting classes, and it shows. They all know how to communicate and to listen to one another on stage. There is never a moment where it feels as though one character or another is just standing there waiting for his or her cue. Rather, they are always absorbed in the moment. This is perhaps to be expected from a veteran like Tim Pugliese who, as the mailman, Charlie, once again demonstrates what a fine character actor he is. Charlie is a man prone to bursting into uncontrolled laughter at the slightest provocation — but it does have to be provoked and Pugliese never jumps the gun before exploding into his guffaws of mirth, which would have been annoying. He waits for us to catch the joke, too, so we can laugh along with him.

But it isn't just the old hands who demonstrate their understanding of staged dialogue. Young Nolan Ellsworth, who plays Billy Ray, Jr., a teenager who is foisted off on the elder Thayer's for a month while his father and their daughter Chelsea go off on a European spree, is just marvelous as we watch him figure out that maybe these old coots aren't so bad after all.

When Annie Pool first arrives at the cabin as Chelsea Thayer, I was worried for her. She seemed so uncomfortable, her arms folded across her chest protectively, her eyes darting about as if looking for hidden enemies. And then I realized, well of course she's uncomfortable, she's Chelsea — a young woman who was either born without a sense of humor or had it trampled to death by her overly sarcastic dad when she was a chubby little kid. This is not an easy role to play — there's a fine line between being sensitive and vulnerable and being a downright pain-in-the-rear, and Poole gets it just right. Through her portrayal of

Chelsea, you could really see how hard it must have been growing up under Norman's ironic gaze.

As her boyfriend, Billy Ray Senior, Jon Ellsworth does a fine job and we all squirm with him as Norman skewers him like an earthworm on a hook when he has the temerity to suggest that he and Chelsea share a bedroom. I think, however, when he finally has enough and confronts Norman, he could use a little more starch.

But of course the play really belongs to Norman and Ethel. With some excellent makeup work that really didn't show, both Charles Alexander and Judy Wick look just perfect for their roles as the 70 something couple who are growing old with varying degrees of grace.

When Norman first arrives at the cabin he is shuffling, distracted and grouchy. Whatever theme his exasperated wife chooses to offer by way of conversation he manages to turn it into a discourse on his impending death.

Death is so much on his mind he is really unable to relax and enjoy his summer on the lake and spends most of his time checking the want ads for gainful employment. Alexander is excellent in this challenging role, especially when he starts to change with the unexpected arrival of young Billy. Gradually his step becomes lighter, his humor less black, and his mind clearer. Things start getting done around the place.

Ethel's role is a little more static. She is perpetually good natured and one of

those souls who is so easily thrilled by the simple pleasures of life — tiny little strawberries, tiny little flowers, tiny little baby loons all enchant her. It could be a bit cloying, but Wick, above all else, makes Ethel a totally likable character. And, it turns out, she does have some grit, which she demonstrates when she gets fed up with Chelsea's whining about her terrible childhood.

To be honest I have seen this play more professionally acted, but never more captivatingly.

Director Shari John also shows her Raiten training in her sure-footed ability to move her characters about the stage in a logical, lively manner, using every corner of her set. There is never a moment when it seems static or contrived. Her characters know this space well and treat it with familiarity.

A good well-directed cast, performing good material is vital to the success of a theatrical production, but what can destroy even the best play and finest acting, and where amateur productions often make their missteps is in the production values — the set, the lights, the props, the costumes. If these are off, it can pull the audience right out of the moment, the place and the story that's being told, and slam them back into their uncomfortable theater seats.

Annie Poole who doubled as the set designer for this show, did a magnificent job. From the call of the loons, to having the correct flowers in season on the cabin table to the cabin itself, with its well worn, cozy clutter, accumulated over generations of summer visits, it all rang true.

My only tiny complaint were a few wrinkles that could be seen on the painted backdrop, and made it unconvincing as a lake scene. Hopefully they will be able to iron that out when it comes to the Grand.

Elena Bourakovsky's costumes — especially for Norman and Ethel, Charlie and young Billy — were terrific. While Chelsea and Billy, Sr. were outfitted appropriately for the 1970ish timing of the play, I thought them over-dressed for the rustic setting, but, actually it just added to their awkwardness and that may have been the costumer's intent.

To sum it up this is just a great show, and those who have only seen the movie of "On Golden Pond" really should this original stage version which is so much better.

Performances at the Grand are Jan 23, 24, 25, 30 and 31 at 7 p.m. Friday and Saturdays and 3 p.m. Sunday. Call 667-9500 for reservations.