

New Surry Theatre Production is “Red Hot”

Written by Ellen Booraem - Special to The Ellsworth American



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BLUE HILL — Somewhere there's a stage comedy that Cindy Robbins can't milk for belly laughs. Fortunately, that play has never made it to Hancock County.

And it's certainly not Neil Simon's "Last of the Red Hot Lovers," which the New Surry Theatre is staging at the Blue Hill Town Hall the next two weekends.

The production started life with two disadvantages: 1. Penobscot Theatre Company had staged it in Bangor just six weeks before NST's opening night, and 2. the play itself, a Tony Award-winner in 1970, has not aged as gracefully as some other Simon hits.

The NST sweeps gleefully past those disadvantages with a cast of two familiar faces and two new ones, directed by veteran NST actor Shari John.

Tim Pugliese, another NST regular, plays Barney Cashman, a 47-year-old Great Neck, N.Y., fish restaurateur aching to try out this Sexual Revolution he's been reading so much about.

(For those under 50, the revolution in question took place after the Pill but before AIDS, where Free Love met the Flower Child.)

Barney organizes three trysts in his mother's apartment while she's out volunteering at the local hospital.

Over three acts — one for each tryst — he tries to overcome three decades of decency with, first, a smoking, drinking, coughing, swearing, adulterous customer from his restaurant; then a ditsy, pot-smoking nightclub singer he met in the park, and finally his wife's best friend, a melancholic prude seeking revenge on her husband.

Pugliese is on stage every second of the play, giving a powerhouse performance with moments of sweetness and poignancy. At times he channels Jack Lemmon; at others (with Robbins, especially) he's in touch with his inner Jack Nicholson.

In her first theatrical venture, Annie Poole is unrecognizable to those who know her as a mild-mannered Brooksville artist and homecare provider. She's as comfortable on stage as if she'd been at this for decades — in the program, she credits her annual Halloween performances on the home front.

As Elaine Navazio, the scotch-swilling adulteress, Poole is terrifyingly on character, with just the right combination of rapaciousness, boredom and despair.

In herself, Elaine is more frightening than funny. The chuckles start when you put her in the same room with sweet, bumbling Barney.

At the opposite end of the spectrum is Bobbi Michele, the flower child played by newcomer Willa Parker. Also utterly at home under the lights, Parker aced her character's smooth transition from charmingly vague to certifiably insane.

About three hours long not counting two intermissions, "Red Hot Lovers" could stand to be trimmed, particularly for a modern audience less likely to be titillated by pot-smoking.

In the third act, however, Robbins' performance as the depressed best friend gave both the audience and Pugliese their second wind.

Robbins is one of the county's most flexible actors — she can switch from high comedy to pathos and back again with facial expression alone. And she carries an energy field with her that enlivens everyone on stage.

This play's third act has the most meat in it for modern times, and it would be easy to let the comedy roll over the message. Robbins and Pugliese do not do that — one minute you're hysterical, the next minute you're trying to count up how many kind and decent people you know.

It ain't Socrates, but you don't really want it to be, do you?

As we watch Barney's evolution as a Man About Great Neck, his clothing evolves, too, from a plain blue suit in the first act to a colorful plaid in the third.

His costumes and those of his intended paramours — expertly designed by Elena Bourakovsky — give us the information we need the minute they walk through the door.

The set is equally informative, designed by the multi-talented Annie Poole and constructed by Frank John, Jon Ellsworth and Bob Poole.

Lighting and sound is by Harry Brillo, Rick Doyle is stage manager, Judy Wick is assistant stage manager, and Jim Fisher and Frank John are the stage crew. Bill Raiten, NST artistic director, is a consultant to the production.