

New Ground Tries Something New: Romantic Comedy

Written by Jill Walsh

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With *The Primitive* opening this weekend, New Ground Theatre is doing something it's never tried before, and director Chris Jansen is very excited. *The Primitive* "is a charming romantic comedy!" she said. "That's right, nobody dies! Nobody gets a horrible disease, and there isn't even any swearing!" During the three years Jansen has been the driving force behind New Ground Theatre, which usually tackles difficult topics such as cancer and suicide, she has had many requests to do a comedy but had a hard time finding one that was warm and intelligent.

The Primitive is both.

Jansen met the playwright, Todd Irvine, at Brandeis University when both were in the graduate playwriting program. After graduating, Irvine moved to Minneapolis and began working with the Playwrights' Center. "He was just beginning to get produced, and had also won a Jerome Fellowship, which is where they pay you to take a year off and write plays, when his health failed," Jansen said. "A lifelong diabetic, Todd had a kidney transplant and a pancreas transplant, then spent time in a coma, and ultimately died in March of 2002, at the age of 41. He never got the chance to use his Jerome Fellowship."

Jansen discovered *The Primitive* when she went up to Minneapolis for Irvine's memorial service at the Playwrights' Center. Parts of three of his last plays were read, and Jansen said she was taken with *The Primitive*. She was given a copy at the service, and Irvine's family granted her the rights to produce it. This is only the second time the play has been staged.

The play uses only two eternal characters, a male and a female, who evolve from amphibians during the Cretaceous era to contemporary human beings in Manhattan. These beings start off simply – worrying about growing tails, starting fires with sticks, and killing mammoths, but they find larger problems and greater knowledge over the course of time – from developing the Phoenician alphabet to discovering the story of Adam and Eve. Whether they're apart for one day or a million years, the couple always has a bond that draws them back together. They aren't

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quite sure whether they're in love or just friends (we've all heard that one), but somehow, the world always allows them to move forward together. Symbolically, the "evolution" of the characters also represents the evolution and endurance of their relationship.

The story moves chronologically, and is an affirmation of love and friendship. I left a recent dress rehearsal smiling and blissful at the incredibly happy ending and was thrilled I'd seen millions of years pass within an hour and a half.

The Primitive is exciting for New Ground on many levels. "For one thing, it's a fascinating examination of the evolution of a relationship," Jansen said. "It's a theme Todd wrote about throughout his short writing life, and I think he really nailed it in this play. It examines things everybody goes through: Why did I want this person so much more *before* she/he wanted me? Why can't I feel romantic about my best friend? Why do connections between some people just never fade? The characters are in modern dress throughout, even as they are inventing the alphabet and learning to make wine. The evolution metaphor is going on on many levels, and yet the play is funny and engaging enough though it is never dry."

Jansen also has a talented cast and crew involved. Patty Koenigsaecker, a professor at Augustana College, designed a set that evolves along with the world in the play. The play starts in the Cretaceous period and moves through Neolithic and Civilization and finally arrives in modern-day Manhattan. Jansen explained, "The set consists of big building blocks, and the characters build each environment (assisted by the lights and sound) during their scenes together. It's fascinating to watch, and surprisingly evocative of the different environments."

Actors Jamie Em Johnson, who is appearing in her third New Ground play, and Dan Hale, a senior at St. Ambrose (who won the Irene Ryan acting award at the national level last spring), are spectacular as the energetic couple. Jansen said, "Although it's not a long show, that's a lot of work for two people, never mind rearranging the set every couple of scenes. These two are more than up for the roles, and they have a wonderful chemistry."

The Primitive is an enchanting love story, and Irvine effectively combined elements from the modern world with those from a primitive one to make an entertaining look at the nature of love as it moved through history.

The Primitive will be performed November 28 through December 7, with performances at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Fridays, and Saturdays, and 2 p.m. Sundays. Adult tickets are \$12 and can be reserved by calling 326-7529.