

Performances Redeem Playcrafters' Predictable "Born Yesterday"

Written by Jill Walsh

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In 1979, Patti Flaherty starred in *Born Yesterday* at Playcrafters Barn Theatre in Moline. Unfortunately, I hadn't yet made my earthly appearance and was unable to review it. But 35 years later, she's given me the chance by directing the current production of *Yesterday* on the same stage. The play is fast-paced if easily foretold, the characters are memorable, and the acting is superb.

Born Yesterday is set in the ritzy hotel living room of the brutish millionaire Harry Brock and his airhead girlfriend, Billie Dawn. We quickly learn that Brock has earned his money by illegally selling "junk" and making deals with political figures. In other words, he's a gangster, the kind of guy who uses muscle instead of reason to get what he wants. Billie Dawn is a whiny ditz who says things such as "I'm stupid and I like it" and is obviously dating Brock for his money.

Soon enough, Brock is introduced to a feisty reporter, Paul Verrall, whom he convinces to "teach" Billie a thing or two about survival in the modern world. Verrall is thrilled with his new job, especially after Billie offers sexual favors in exchange for his efforts. Eventually, the reporter has the blond bimbo quoting Alexander Pope, reading political novels, and standing up to Brock when he threatens her. Sadly, though, this story ends too predictably, leaving the dumb-oaf mobster wondering how his money disappeared and the new happy couple heading for the church with marriage in mind.

Garson Kanin's comedy about politics, power, and stupidity isn't very interesting to watch in terms of story, but it is intriguing because of the level of talent and poise the actors possess. In one moment, Bob Hanske (as Harry Brock) spat out his drink (these characters were drinking incessantly) but continued with his next line. After the show, I had a chance to talk with Hanske, who had swallowed a bug that was in his drink. I couldn't believe how quickly he recovered from this unexpected obstacle.

Hanske, like most of the actors in *Yesterday*, is a veteran of Quad Cities stages, and it shows. These are some of the most spirited and versatile performers in the area, who have this wonderful opportunity to interact and provide a comfortable stage atmosphere that really puts the audience in a position to believe each actor's every move and word. For example, Greg Bouljon (Senator Hedges) put the perfect amount of twang in his Southern accent, which didn't exceed believability but also left a lasting impression. Michael Carron (Ed Devery) played the

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stoically soused guy who does Brock's dirty work with a wonderful subtlety. (By the end of the show, he had taken so many subtle shots of alcohol that I wondered how his character could walk.) The audience favorite, Ryan Moshier (Billie Dawn), bravely flitted about in high heels and lingerie, and used an appropriately annoying high-pitched whine, which had my ears ringing by intermission.

And it's a good thing that the actors are so strong, because the story strains credulity in addition to being predictable. I wonder how a woman like Billie, who claims pride at her stupidity, can suddenly foil a millionaire gangster's plans and still be alive to escape with her reporter. I am amazed at how much knowledge she acquired in two weeks.

But although much of the plot was unbelievable, I enjoyed watching *Yesterday* for the actors who created a reality worth believing in.

Born Yesterday at Playcrafters Barn Theatre continues on March 19, 20, 26, and 27 at 7:30 p.m. and March 21 and 28 at 3 p.m.