

The Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's "Desk Set" Full of Laughs, Promise

Written by Jill Walsh
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Richmond Hill Players Theatre has done a very good thing. Instead of usual attempts to “wow” audiences with edgy (and, in my opinion, too brilliantly written for community theatre) scripts such as Steve Martin’s *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* or efforts to appeal to the older generation with shows such as *On Golden Pond* and *Driving Miss Daisy*, the organization’s current production of *Desk Set* settles contentedly into a much-needed middle ground.

William Marchant’s script has a plotline we’ve all heard before: Brassy, vivacious woman overcomes obstacles in the workplace and outsmarts the man behind it all, winning her admirer’s undying devotion and patching up any mishaps that might have occurred. And yet *Desk Set* is surprisingly appealing and new because of the direction of Joseph DePauw, who has effectively teased out every sarcastic line and outlandish expression from his actors to add to the show’s hilarity.

Desk Set, concluding its two-week run on Sunday in Geneseo’s Barn Theatre, takes place during the 1950s in the reference department of a television and radio broadcasting company in Manhattan. A witty group of women work in the office for Bonita (Bunny) Watson, who has an uncommon mental capacity for odd facts. Soon enough, trouble arrives in the form of Richard Sumner, an efficiency expert who begins planning for the installation of Emmaracs (essentially, computers) in place of human workers. And of course, the machines cannot compete with Bunny’s skilled employees. Though scenes with the functional Emmaracs are essential to the plotline, the most intriguing moments involve the interactions of the office workers, such as the hilarious and believable drunken Christmas party. (I wouldn’t be surprised if there really was champagne in those plastic cups!)

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While the entire cast contributes to the success of *Desk Set*, Jessica Nicol stands out as the innocent yet bitingly sarcastic blond bombshell Bunny. Nicol ably handled each of Bunny's witty remarks with the quick timing essential to earning many laughs. Ann Morman played Bunny's office sidekick with gusto and feminine quirkiness, while Kenneth Ohr (as Richard Sumner) contributed a dry, workaholic attitude that effectively contrasted with Bunny's vivacity.

Finally, *Desk Set* restored my hope for some community-theatre organizations (Richmond Hill included) that in recent years have seemed to rely on the same stable of actors. This show boasted a wide array of ages and talents, giving the quirky veteran leads their much-deserved chances to shine and debut actors and crew members opportunities in small roles. This is a promising formula for real, diverse community theatre that consistently expands the reach of the productions and excites people of all ages, talent levels, and interests. For the future of Richmond Hill, I hope the formula computes.

Desk Set continues Thursday through Sunday at Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo. Showtimes are 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, and 4 p.m. Sunday. For more information, visit (<http://www.rhplayers.com>). For reservations, call (309)944-2244.