

## In Praise of the CAST Cast: "Don't Drink the Water" at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 02 August 2005 18:00

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Perhaps the biggest pleasure in attending an entire season of summer-stock theatre lies in the chance to see familiar faces in show after show. If a company's actors have impressed you in the past, just noticing their names in a new program is enough to make you smile, and I've now smiled throughout four consecutive shows at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre (CAST). By this point, I'm so happy just *seeing* Katherine Walker Hill and Nicole Horton and Chris Amos and Craig Merriman and Patrick Stinson and Sandee Cunningham and Michael Oberfield and the rest of CAST's 2005 ensemble that it barely matters what show they're in; with actors this enjoyable, audiences are all but *guaranteed* to have a great time. (It's a wonderful argument for remaining faithful to a theatre ... and for purchasing season subscriptions.)

CAST's current production is Woody Allen's *Don't Drink the Water*, which concerns the Hollanders, a middle-class Jewish family vacationing in Eastern Europe who find themselves trapped in an American embassy after being accused of espionage. Now I consider myself a voracious Woody Allen fan, but I'll freely admit that

*Don't Drink the Water*

isn't one of my favorites; many of the jokes are hilarious, but Allen, in this late-1960s work, hadn't yet learned how to incorporate the jokes into his characters' personalities. They don't really

*have*

personalities – the characters exist solely to spit out punchlines. (It's the reason some of us have an aversion to Neil Simon.) And many of Allen's comic inspirations don't pan out. The romantic plotline between twitchy embassy aide Axel (Merriman) and libidinous Hollander daughter Susan (Hill) feels distractingly underdeveloped, and a few supporting figures – the excitable chef, the drunken Sultan – are only half-realized, more like

*ideas*

for comedic characters than the real thing.

But with the actors that producer Jay Berkow and director Mark Liermann have assembled here, why bitch? This group could read their *shopping lists* and leave you laughing. Stinson, channeling Jackie Gleason, bellows sensationally as the dyspeptic Hollander

*père*

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and pulls off subtler bits with exquisite panache; his attempts to light a cigarette with a pistol, or defend himself with a ridiculous series of karate moves, made me – and the rest of the audience – roar. Horton, as his wife, inflects her stereotypical Jewish-mother nagging with world-weary resignation, as if she's lived with this horse's ass for

*far*

too long, and Hill is such an inventive, clever comedienne that she easily transcends her one-and-a-half-joke role. (Watch her whenever Axel leaves a room; Susan is practically

*faint*

with passion, and Hill plays it as if even

*she's*

surprised by how turned on she is.)

As Axel, Merriman seems to have found the perfect outlet for his boyish hyper-kineticism, he performs his pratfalls beautifully, and his battle of wills with a pugnacious co-worker (a game, spirited Chris Appuhn) makes for a great running gag – Merriman is a delightful farcical lead. I could, and probably should, continue – about Amos as a European heavy (his comically intimidating stares are funnier than most of Allen's *lines*), about Cunningham's steely turn as an American ambassador, about the hysterical, confident Jack Braden as a magical priest – but if you've seen any of the other Showboat productions this summer, you already know that

*Don't Drink the Water*

will be well worth your time; this summer, the CAST has employed a helluva good one.

For tickets or more information, visit <http://www.clintonshowboat.org>.