Written by Mike Schulz Tuesday, 17 January 2006 18:00

Joe DiPietro's *Over the River & Through the Woods* is a charming stage sitcom, and based on a final dress rehearsal held January 10, the production of it that opened the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's 2006 season is perfectly charming, too. The large, invited audience of (mostly) seniors who attended the rehearsal seemed to have a terrific time; the show's punchlines, more often than not, got their laughs, and there was no denying the sweetness of spirit that emanated from the show – if smiles were

audible, it would have been deafening in the Barn Theatre.

Yet this production, directed by Greg Bouljon, also proved how rare it is to find a truly *inspired* stage sitcom, and

Over the River ...

, while never less than likable, rarely rises above

likable. It's a nice, pleasant production of a nice, pleasant play, and for many, that will be enough. But what's missing – at least based on that dress rehearsal – is freshness and surprise, those bursts of real-life eccentricity that can turn a conventional comedy into something more memorable.

The show concerns thirtysomething Nick Cristano (Dan Marquis) as he tries, ever so delicately, to free himself from the emotional clutches of his grandparents – Nunzio and Emma Cristano (Howard Johnson and Jan Golz) and Frank and Aida Gianelli (Chris Browne and Jackie Skiles) – by leaving the confines of New Jersey and accepting a promotion in Seattle; his relations attempt to keep Nick in town by matching him with a charming neighborhood girl (Catherine Woodard). It's one of those implausible but effective stage scenarios that also allow for maximum sentiment, which *Over the River* ... indulges in further by having the Italian characters – most often Nick – take turns monologuing their thoughts about " *la famiglia*

" throughout the play.

This convention, though, is a cheat, a rather simplistic way for the playwright to reveal character without actually exploring it in any depth; motivation and subtext are ladled on top of the drama instead of existing *within* the drama. (Neil Simon perfected this lazy technique in his *Brighton Beach*

trilogy.) And in Playcrafters'

Over the River ...

- , the awkwardness is compounded by Bouljon having the actors deliver their reveries under a dramatic downlight that they must occasionally walk into
- ; it sometimes takes the actors a moment to hit their marks, the resulting pauses cause the momentum to lag, and we become too conscious of the use of the monologues as a narrative device. (They feel less like personal revelations than a half-hearted way for DiPietro to impart information.) Directorially, it's about the only glitch in Bouljon's work here he certainly makes impressive use of the Barn's narrow thrust stage but there's one other noticeable failing in this

Over the River

: Playcrafters' ensemble (as of early last week, at least) isn't entirely convincing as a

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family

, and unless we buy them as relations, Over the River & Through the Woods can't truly soar.

Certainly, they're often delightful *individually*. Marquis displays a touching, hangdog earnestness, and the four actors who play Nick's grandparents are confident troupers. Browne exudes a debonair charm reminiscent of Donald O'Connor. Golz's terrific low voice is just right for deadpan comedy. Skiles is a daffily pushy sweetheart. And Johnson, spitting out his lines with comic aggression – regarding Nick's decision to dine on Chinese food, Nunzio blurts out, "It's like eating *cancer*!" – often makes you laugh with his unpredictable vocal emphasis; Johnson sounds just like Dana Carvey's Grumpy Old Man on *Saturday Night Live*.

But DiPietro's comedy is devoted to the love-hate relationship that exists among closely knit family members, and that bond is what's missing here. (Also missing are Italian accents, but I'll happily take no accents over distracting ones.) The actors seem to genuinely like one another, yet you never sense, as you should, that Nick often wants to strangle his grandparents – at worst, he seems vaguely annoyed with them – and you don't feel how desperate they are to have Nick stay with them. Everyone in *Over the River* ... seems awfully *nice* – *too* nice, it turns out, for the show's plot to make much sense.

But as I saw a tech-dress of this *Over the River* ... as opposed to an actual paid performance, I should be charitable; a deepening of character relationships might well have occurred prior to opening night, and for a dress rehearsal, Playcrafters' production – technically – seemed in good shape. (Knowing full well how much can change from rehearsal to first performance, I'd rather avoid reviewing productions before their *official*

opening, but my schedule, unfortunately, dictated an earlier-than-expected visit to the Barn Theatre.) And, as mentioned earlier, the elder audience members were clearly having a good time.

Over the River & Through the Woods is affable, to be sure. I hope that, by last Friday's opening night, it became invigorating, too.

For tickets or more information, visit (http://www.playcrafters.com).