

What's the Story?: "The Philadelphia Story," at the Timber Lake Playhouse through June 24

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 20 June 2006 22:45



The morning after attending the Timber Lake Playhouse's production of the romantic comedy *The Philadelphia Story*

, I drove to my local video store and rented the DVD of the beloved 1940 film, which I had never seen. I would love to report that Timber Lake's production put me in such a happy state that I was simply eager to re-live the stage experience. But unfortunately, the rental was more of a necessity than an indulgence; I had to see what about Philip Barry's play made the movie such a treasure, because its reputed charms, sadly, weren't at all apparent on the Mt. Carroll stage.

There are three elements of the movie that couldn't possibly be replicated on *any* stage, of course: Katherine Hepburn, Cary Grant, and Jimmy Stewart. But no one attending a stage version of

Philadelphia Story

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could possibly expect any performers to match the charisma of Hepburn, Grant, and Stewart, and the trio of actors Timber Lake recruited to play their roles - Sarah Dothage as Tracy Lord, Kyle Sandall as C.K. Dexter Haven, and Sean Riley as Mike Connor - appeared competent enough.

What they *didn't* appear to be, though, was connected to the material. Timber Lake's production of *The Philadelphia Story* seemed not only lacking in conviction but in basic *coherence*

, as if the performers - and not just the leads - didn't know what effects they were supposed to be striving for, and director Shade Murray didn't bother telling them. (At the intermission, my friend asked me, "Is this a comedy?", and I wasn't quite sure how to answer him.)

Barry's play concerns a socialite who juggles a fiancé, an ex-husband, and an amorous reporter on the eve of her wedding, and the playwright's dialogue is laced with biting wit, especially during Tracy's verbal duels with Dexter and Mike. But in this production, the dialogue doesn't have any *meaning* behind it, because we're never exactly sure about who these people *are*.

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There's a telling routine between Tracy and her mother (Barbara Rosenbalm) very early in the show, in which Tracy asks for the correct spelling of "omelet." The mother begins spelling, "O-M-M ...," and Tracy responds not by correcting her, but by saying, "I thought there was another L in there." It's a great, funny gag - revealing the smart, aristocratic Tracy as also a little foolish - but here it just seems strange, because Dothage performs with sensible nonchalance, and doesn't appear the least *bit* foolish. Dothage seems a fine actress and underplays with skill, and when Tracy gets a few drinks in her, she's even endearing. But for the character of Tracy to work, she has to be not only a little flighty but a bit of a pain in the ass, two qualities that aren't revealed here.

Similarly, we don't know what to make of Dexter, because although Sandall performs the character's self-infatuation well enough, Dexter's history with his ex-wife isn't clear, and while the production's liveliest moments come from Riley's inventive line readings as Mike, you don't quite feel his connection with Tracy, either. There are some amusing, clever portrayals on the sidelines - Abby Haug as Mike's photographer, Justin Sample as Uncle Willie - along with a couple of distractingly poor supporting performances, but despite their efforts, it's the unfocused central relationship among the three leads that makes much of *Philadelphia's* story so confusing. (The show's final romantic pay-off might strike some viewers as baffling.)

To take some heat off the central actors, though, it's impossible to gauge the show's tone, as director Murray doesn't appear to have *established* one - the import of what's happening on-stage doesn't register because we barely feel introduced to the characters, or their world, in the first place. Nothing in this *Philadelphia Story* makes much sense, but I do have to thank the production for, at long last, getting me to see the film version of Barry's play. I finally *understood* this *Story*.

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For tickets, call (815)244-2035.