Written by Mike Schulz
Tuesday, 04 July 2006 22:38

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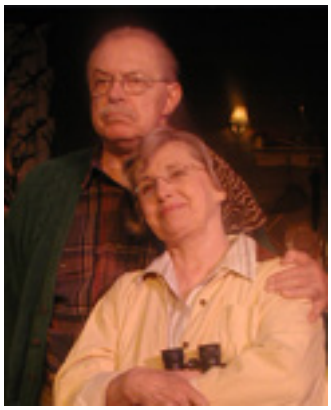

A half-hour before Friday's performance of *On Golden Pond* at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse, the theatre's producer (and *Pond* director) Dennis Hitchcock took the stage, and after making the traditional opening-night welcomes, warned that the show's first act alone ran nearly 80 minutes - a long haul, he explained, for elder audiences. Yet I'm thinking that Hitchcock's announcement was made less out of concern for the crowd's bladders than out of justifiable pride - a trek to the restroom would force people to miss parts of the show, and with the stunningly fine performance Michael Kennedy is giving here, who would want to miss even *one*?

On Golden Pond concerns Norman and Ethel Thayer (Kennedy and Barbara Fayth Humphrey), who have spent 48 summers at their lakeside cabin in Maine, and nothing really needs to be said about the story; through its stage versions and the beloved 1981 movie, most audiences are at least passingly familiar with the show. Ernest Thompson's play has enormous goodwill built into it and is perfectly charming, but, in all honesty, it's also a bit saccharine - less sentimental than the movie, certainly, but too reliant on easy wisecracks and pithy Life Lessons, and it's tempting for the material to be played with overt, fraudulent cutesiness.

There is *nothing* cutesy, though, about Kennedy's portrayal. With his imposing physique and sublimely calibrated readings - at their best, his eloquent mumblings rival Brando's - Kennedy is stunningly good here. He delivers Norman's put-downs spectacularly, throwing away the best ones so you laugh about three seconds after the fact, but the sheer emotionalism of his performance is truly overwhelming; when, late in the play, Norman stares death in the face, Kennedy truly appears stricken, and leaves you, like the character, shaken by the experience. I was fortunate enough to catch Kennedy's heart-wrenching work in *Death of a Salesman* in 2004, and thought I might never see a better area performance. His Norman Thayer nearly matches it.

Humphrey, sadly, isn't in Kennedy's league. To be fair, few performers *are*, and the actress' comic exasperation with Norman often pays off in unexpectedly amusing ways. (After her husband's health crisis, Ethel looks to the heavens and says, "You don't want him," and the way Humphrey delivers the line, she seems to *mean* it.) But she's too presentational, too knowingly adorable, and the dichotomy in Kennedy's and Humphrey's styles makes their scenes together feel uneven; they could be acting in completely separate productions of *On Golden Pond.* Humphrey is never less than likable, yet unlike Kennedy, you don't necessarily *believe* her - she's acceptable but artificial. (The same could be said for young Shane Miller's Billy Ray; Miller doesn't seem to have been directed to do much more than recite lines, but his reading of Billy's introductory wisecrack, at least, is a beaut.)

The other actors fare better. *On Golden Pond*'s most troubling character is the Thayers' continually mopey grown daughter, Chelsea, who can easily come off as a whiny pain. Yet Kimberly Furness - especially when playing off Kennedy - pulls off this conception with flair. Furness' physicality is especially good, her edgy movement suggesting years of discomfort in the Thayers' house, and her weary, husky voice is just right for Chelsea; Furness makes the character's baffling bitterness not only palatable, but moving.

Adam Michael Lewis' Bill - blathering on about how Chelsea is "really flowering" and how their relationship is "very kinetic" - could have walked in from an EST seminar or primal-scream-therapy session. (Circa ‘21's production retains *On Golden Pond*'s original, late-'70s setting.) Yet incredibly, he's not a jerk, or even a blowhard; Lewis sweetly, subtly suggests the nerves beneath Bill's attempts at a good impression - when Bill makes a

momentary ass of himself, Lewis' self-directed disgust is delicately hilarious - and Bill's impatience with Norman is forceful without being mean-spirited. With minimal stage time to do it in, Lewis forms a fully fleshed-out character.

Tom Walljasper, meanwhile, is predictably focused and skillful as mailman Charlie, but he's hindered by a rather annoying character tic - a staccato laugh that's repeated past the breaking point. Walljasper gives one of those rare performances that's *too* faithful to the text, or rather, to the stage directions; in the span of a 15-minute scene, playwright Thompson dictates that Charlie "laughs" 21 times, "laughs and laughs" five times, "roars with laughter" twice, "half-laughs" twice, and even "snickers" once. At one point, Ethel says to Walljasper's character, "I love your laugh, Charlie." I did, too. I would have loved it more if I'd heard it less.

Directorially, Hitchcock's staging is impressive, and it's wonderful witnessing a production where the actors are given space and time to breathe; the show's natural, easygoing rhythm is soothing without being sedentary. I liked *On Golden Pond* considerably, but I have to mention that the demographic for whom the show was designed - and you know who you are - seemed to positively *love* it.

In my review of Circa '21's *Cats*, I made an unwitting accomplice out of my father by quoting his disappointment with the show, so allow me to make amends - Dad said that if the people sitting in front of him at *On Golden Pond* hadn't risen first, he would have started the standing ovation *himself*. I'm guessing a lot of audience members for this reliably appealing effort - buoyed here by Kennedy's rapturous performance - will feel exactly the same way.

For tickets, call (309)786-7733 extension 2.