

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 15 August 2006 22:52

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Last August, in writing about the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's production of *Over the Tavern*, I prefaced my review by mentioning the conversation I had with the couple sitting next to me; none of us had previously heard of the Tom Dudzick comedy we were about to see, and were looking forward to the surprise.

One year later, as luck would have it, I found myself seated beside the very same couple for another Richmond Hill presentation unfamiliar to us - John Patrick's *A Bad Year for Tomatoes*, directed by Joseph R. DePauw - and I'm thinking that my accidental theatre-going companions are some kind of good-luck charm. For while Patrick's comedy is nowhere near as strong as *Over the Tavern*,

it, too, is a fine surprise, a silly piece of fluff made enjoyable by its delightfully nutty cast.

*Tomatoes*

itself is only borderline funny, but luckily for Patrick - and for the Richmond Hill audience - DePauw's actors elicit more laughs from the material than they should be expected to.

*Tomatoes*' setup, at least, is goofily amusing. Hollywood performer Myra Marlowe (Diane Greenwood), looking for a quiet place to write her autobiography, rents out a tiny home in New England. Constant visits by badgering neighbors and local eccentrics, however, make concentration impossible - oddly, despite being labeled "the best actress in the business" by her

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agent Tom (Kevin Brake), none of the townsfolk knows who Myra is - so the actress devises a character to ward them off: a Baby Jane-like twin sister, locked in the next room, who is prone to cutting off visitors' ears with scissors. (This ruse is handily accomplished with a tape recorder and, when the situation demands a *physical* presence, a blond fright wig and screechy hayseed accent.) Need I tell you that complications ensue?

Obviously, we're not meant to *believe* any of this, but *Tomatoes* has a perfectly acceptable farcical structure. I just wish the playwright had a better ear for dialogue. For long stretches, Patrick seems to have studied at the Neil Simon School for Snappy Banter, where every clever utterance is followed by an even-

*more-*

clever comeback, and this wouldn't be so egregious if the jokes were actually

*funny*

Yet the punchlines are obvious and you could set your watch to the percussive beats of the dialogue; the cheeky relentlessness of

*Tomatoes*

' repartee, especially between Myra and Tom, grows tiresome. (At one point during the first of several interminable conversations, the actress says to her agent, "Stop being a wit," and I thought: Yes,

*please*

.)

But while Patrick may not have much talent for crafty repartee, he appears skillful at character comedy, especially in the personages of Myra's annoying drop-ins. Two of them, a pair of Christian gossips played by Eugenia Giebel and Jan Andersen, have a terrific bit in which they argue about whether a local ne'er-do-well had intimate relations with a chicken or a turkey, and Giebel's busybody trumps her companion with, "I was at the *trial*." And David Bailey portrays a backwoods half-wit who asks Myra what she does for a living, and responds to her being a writer with, "Horseback?" The neighbors' dialogue is amusing, but better still, it's

*human*

, and the actors in these roles are just loopy enough to make their comedic stereotypes fly.

Giebel makes for an absolutely endearing hypocrite, and is especially good when snapping at her secretly boozy best friend, played by Andersen as an adorably willing lush. Susan Perrin-Sallak, as an amateur psychic, has a thrilling low voice and intimidating presence; charging across the stage in flowing caftans and delivering zingers with a withering glare, she's like Bea Arthur's Maude, and would get similar laughs if Patrick gave her funnier things to say. (As she proved in Playcrafters' *Enchanted April* last summer, Perrin-Sallak is a sensational deadpan comic.)

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And Bailey, despite being saddled with a terrible fake beard - a *cardboard* beard would have looked more convincing - is really something. He inflects his lines as if the very act of speaking were an incredible imposition, and displays a genuine, unexpected sweetness; the biggest laugh in the show comes when Myra's "sister" rushes out to him, scissors aloft, and he greets her with a disarmingly genial, "Hi!"

As for Greenwood, she's the show's linchpin, and it's hard to imagine it working half so well with another performer in the lead. As an actress, Greenwood is stylized but she isn't phony; she means every daffy word that comes out of her mouth. She's also smart enough not to take Patrick's material all that seriously - her Myra is annoyed without ever being a killjoy - and Greenwood looks like she's having the time of her life; when Myra does a happy little dance while preparing her scheme, or when she beams with pride when Bailey's hick compliments the rear end of her "sister," Greenwood's performance joy is infectious.

It certainly seemed to be for Friday's Richmond Hill audience, who rose to give *A Bad Year for Tomatoes* a standing ovation, and for the couple I was seated with, who laughed delightedly and laughed often. We made plans to meet up again for Richmond Hill's production *next* August. Expect me to enjoy that one, too.

*For tickets, call (309) 944-2244.*