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Lee Blessing's *The Winning Streak*, currently at Davenport's Nighswander Theatre, is one of those shows that could easily read better than it plays.

This two-man comedy-drama concerns an estranged father and son who tentatively bond during the late-season rally of a struggling Midwestern baseball team; over the course of seven scenes, Omar (Pat Flaherty) and Ry (Jason Platt) squabble, reach an impasse, and begin squabbling again.

Yet while Blessing writes clever dialogue and displays a shrewd understanding of familial dynamics, *The Winning Streak* is the type of play that, if it isn't *perfectly* cast, can be hell to sit through; the witty badinage can feel oppressive in the sledgehammer style of Neil Simon, and the insights can feel tacked-on and maudlin. (And there isn't enough going on visually to distract you *from* the dialogue.)
If the actors portraying Omar and Ry aren't at the top of their game - or, worse, if one performer is on and the other isn't playing along - you could easily admire the script while disliking its actual performance.

Thankfully, Flaherty, Platt, and director Chris Jansen have succeeded in making this New Ground Theatre endeavor an enjoyable, and even memorable, experience. Flaherty, as Blessing's dyspeptic former-umpire father, and Platt, as his sensitive art-restorer son, are even more impressive than the *show*; in their hands, Blessing's work emerges as something greater than a humorous, touching actor's showcase - their committed portrayals could legitimately move you to tears. Flaherty and Platt make *The Winning Streak* play better than it *reads*.

One of the continuing joys of my tenure as a local-theatre reviewer is that - every few weeks it seems - I get to write great things about Pat Flaherty. Offhand, I can only think of two or three local performers who match the *joie de vivre* that Flaherty brings to each new role; is anyone else on local stages having this much fun? In 2006 alone, he's appeared in New Ground's *Boy Gets Girl* and *String Fever,* St. Ambrose University's *Much Ado About Nothing,* Genesius Guild's *The Tempest* and *The Birds* ... and each of his characters is unique, heartfelt, and focused, and blessed with the actor's naturalistic, delightfully unpredictable rhythms.

Flaherty's casting in *The Winning Streak* proves to be an inspiration, and not just because of his expected excellence; in Blessing's conception, Omar is a major bastard, yet Flaherty brings so many shadings to the part that you don't recoil from him. Scene after scene finds Ry attempting to connect with his father only to be swatted down with sarcasm and indifference, and Blessing gives Omar the kinds of bilious outbursts that should make Ry - and the audience - duck for cover. (Act I ends with Omar screaming, "You're a terrible son! You're a *terrible, terrible* son!" And, at several points in Act II, he actually gets *nastier*.)

But Flaherty's gifts are such that he softens the edge on much of Omar's hatefulness, not by

ignoring his mean streak, but by revealing so many *other* facets of the character, ones that are only hinted at in the script. In New Ground's production, Omar is a jerk, yes, but a really *funny* jerk, and also gregarious and introspective and, when he needs to be, surprisingly tender. In the wrong hands, Omar could be a one-note caricature. Flaherty plays so many notes that it's practically a symphony.

It's a pleasure to again report on Flaherty's talents, and I only wish I had more opportunities to rave about those of his co-star - to my knowledge, this is Platt's first local stage appearance since the defunct Ghostlight Theatre's production of *Noises Off* last autumn. Would that he made *more*! Platt's ridiculously inspired slapstick turn was the *coup de grâce* of Ghostlight's comedy, but what lingered in the memory was the *humanity* he brought to his goofy caricature; Platt's readings, like Flaherty's, never seem less than completely spontaneous, and he lets you know that far more is going on in the character's head than perhaps even the *playwright* is aware of.

In *The Winning Streak*'s opening scene - set in an airport bar, with the characters having just been introduced - Platt's Ry stammers and clears his throat and does his best to make a good impression, and the actor's nervous energy plays off of Flaherty's comedic stoicism spectacularly. Ry has inherited his father's (or, rather, *Blessing's*) leanings toward the sardonic, but like Flaherty, Platt tempers his wisecracks so they don't *sound* like wisecracks - they sound like the off-the-cuff retorts of a clever man.

As the play progresses, however, Ry's desperation begins to seep through his attempts at father-son bonding, and Platt becomes intensely affecting; you ache for Ry to make the connection he so obviously needs. Platt and Flaherty are almost impossibly well-matched in *The Winning Streak,* and Jansen, giving her actors plenty of breathing room, orchestrates their give-and-take with expert care and precision. Their deeply focused work turns a chamber piece into nearly exhilarating theatre.

A good thing, too, because as a septet of conversations, *The Winning Streak* doesn't allow for much variety in the stage picture, and at Thursday's matinee performance, at least, the show's few technical flourishes were rather ineptly handled. (The timing, and volume, of the sound was off in more than one scene, and there was a serious botch at the end of Act I, which is dependent on a light switch being turned on and off; with the baffling effects on display this past Thursday, you'd only understand the climactic action if you'd read the play in advance.) But Flaherty and Platt easily transcended such impediments, and could have transcended much worse - they knock
The Winning Streak
straight out of the park.

For tickets, call (563) 326-7529.