Written by Mike Schulz Wednesday, 15 November 2006 02:24



James McLure's *Lone Star*, currently being produced at Moline's Black Hawk College, is one of the most delightful theatrical surprises of 2006. Set in the mid-'70s outside a small-town bar in Texas, McLure's one-act is an extended conversation between two brothers - Roy (Damian Cassini), newly returned from Vietnam with emotional baggage and a serious drinking problem, and his sweetly obtuse younger sibling Ray (Jeremy Kelly), whose "football knee" kept him out of service. Over the course of an hour, the brothers bicker, bond, and briefly converse with the town dweeb, Cletis (Nicholas Waldbusser), and all throughout, Lone Star beers are endlessly consumed; by the play's end, Roy will barely be able to stand.

Yet the joy - and surprise - of Black Hawk's production is that you don't necessarily *want* him to stand. McLure explores serious themes in *Lone Star* 

but does so with the lightest of touches, and he's generous enough to realize that while people drink for all sorts of "wrong" reasons, they also drink for a few "right" ones - McLure understands that Roy, unequipped to properly verbalize his experiences, is managing his confusion and dislocation the only way he knows how. McLure isn't at all judgmental about Roy's inebriation, and his open-heartedness lets us relish the drunken ramblings without guilt; there are times when the playwright practically makes heavy intoxication look like a state of grace.

What helps, of course, is that McLure has written hysterical situations and dialogue for his characters, and under the lively direction of Dan Haughey, Cassini, Kelly, and Waldbusser elicit deeply satisfying laughs; excepting the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's July presentation of *In credible Sex* 

, it's the funniest stage production I've seen all year. (And the enjoyment is continuous

I don't think a minute passed without my laughing out loud, and even Lone Star

's final

sound -

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a blissful exclamation by Kelly - is a hoot.)

Cassini and Kelly engage in dazzlingly entertaining arguments - over the correct pluralization of Mars bars (as in "two Mars bars, one *Mar* bar"), Ray's fitness for military service, the correct sequence in which to consume sweet and salty snacks while drinking beer - and the actors' total commitment to their gags and nutty, unpredictable readings explode McLure's already-inspired dialogue. And oftentimes the actors will score laughs merely through a perfectly timed facial reaction; it's pretty amusing when Ray expounds on how much a Baby Ruth looks like a turd, but what sells the joke is the goofy grin on Ray's face when he gobbles it down *anyway* 

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The performers' considerable comedic talents would be enough to make *Lone Star* fly, but what makes the show resonate is the honesty of Cassini's and Kelly's brotherly affection. Ray reacts to Roy with such endearing hero worship, and Roy responds with such gruffly touching appreciation - even when he's screaming - that you have no problem believing in the two as brothers; they converse with an effortless ease that you only see among siblings, or best friends, or those lucky enough to be both. (

Lone Star

's most moving throwaway occurs when Roy - during a drunken diatribe - pauses and asks Ray, "You've heard this story already, haven't you?" and his brother says "Yeah" with a sheepish grin that suggests he'd happily hear it a thousand times more.)

Add to Cassini's and Kelly's superior efforts Haughey's smart pacing and an absolutely spectacular comic performance by Waldbusser - who, as the jumpy *über*-nebbish, delivers his lines as though distracted by four simultaneous conversations going on in his head - and *Lone Star* 

emerges as topnotch entertainment, well-matched by the evening's opening (one-)act, McLure's

Laundry & Bourbon

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A boozy, back-porch chat among three women (including the wives of Roy and Cletis), *Laundry & Bourbon*.

directed here by Donna Hare, has some of the piquancy and tenderness of Lone Star

, and a lot of good, bitchy humor, too. It doesn't cut as deeply, or make you laugh as hard, as the one-act that follows it, but Black Hawk's actresses - Madison Depoorter, Alysa Grimes, and

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Heather Bell - hurl one-liners at each other with genial snippiness, and have occasionally marvelous moments; when Depoorter, with dreamy wistfulness, describes dropping her ice-cream cone during her first encounter with Roy, or when the spirited Grimes engages in a parentally negligent (and terrifically funny) phone conversation with her child, the show is a more-than-fitting preparation for the highs of *Lone Star* 

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And, at Thursday night's performance, Depoorter and Grimes earned bonus points for degree of difficulty. During the first 20 minutes, a series of latecomers and (I'm guessing) audience members with weak bladders continually walked in and out of Black Hawk's theatre space; the constant opening and closing of the room's heavy door was almost unbearably distracting, as was the stage-whispering of those doing the entering, exiting, opening, and closing. But working against such annoyances, Depoorter and Grimes (Bell's character entering later in the play) never got rattled, and in fact, became more poised and confident as the distractions grew - their refusal to let the off-stage commotion steal the show not only won our attention, but our *respect*. One of the thrills of watching student actors is seeing them grow in confidence over the span of a season. Sometimes, as in

Laundry & Bourbon

, you get to watch that happen over the span of an hour

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Lone Star and Laundry & Bourbon will be presented at Black Hawk College in Building 1, room 306. For more information, call (309) 796-5419.