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Before praising the Green Room's lovely, charming production of *Eleemosynary* - the Lee Blessing comedy/drama that ran February 22 through 24 - I feel compelled to also praise the show's Friday-night audience. Actually, I feel compelled to praise the audiences at *each* of the productions I've attended in this Rock Island space; for fellow theatre devotees who tend to grow hostile near patrons who routinely cough, shift in their seats, slowly open cellophane-wrapped candies, and forget to turn off their cell phones, the Green Room is easily the area's venue of choice.

From 2002 to 2005, back when it housed the Brew & View, the building was a safe haven for movie-lovers. The intimate space and outside-the-mainstream film selections combined to create an experience as refreshing as it was cozy; you had the sense that those around you wanted to be there as much as you did, and would be equally respectful about sharing the

entertainment without being a personal irritant. Happily, this collective courtesy has extended to the building's new incarnation; I've now seen four Green Room presentations - boasting near-full to sold-out houses each time - and haven't encountered one audibly rude or even *distr acting* audience member at any of them.

There were plenty of delights to be had at Friday's *Eleemosynary* performance, but the biggest one may have been watching this touching, funny generational saga work its small-scale magic on the Green Room's attendees. A series of monologues by, and dialogues between, the willfully eccentric Dorothea (Susan McPeters), her emotionally reticent adult daughter Artie (Angela Elliott), and Artie's brainiac daughter Echo (Abby Van Gerpen), Blessing's 75-minute one-act is unapologetically devoid of action, and even of confrontation - Echo finally begins shouting at the mother who abandoned her roughly three minutes before the curtain call. Yet under Derek Bertelsen's direction, *Eleemosynary*, talky though it is, seemed to positively captivate the audience, and given its trio of performers, this could hardly be considered surprising.

Van Gerpen's sweetness and natural stage charisma would be enough for any production, but fortunately for this one (and its audiences), she also appears to possess loads of acting talent. In a role that took her from infancy to young-adulthood, Van Gerpen physicalized her prodigy with wonderful abandon - she had a child's defiant, temper-tantrum stance down pat - and managed to suggest intimidating smarts without ever coming across as bratty; the actress' put-upon tirades when her character competes in the National Spelling Bee were hysterical because Echo's sense of entitlement felt both deserved and *honest*.

Yet Van Gerpen was somehow even better whenever she removed her egghead eyeglasses and addressed the audience as an older, more empathetic version of her *wunderkind*. Replacing the young Echo's precociousness with poise, and speaking to us with a naturalistic directness that revealed true comfort with both her material and her space, Van Gerpen made an effortless bond with her listeners, and her lightly authoritative monologues were matched by those of Elliott, who gave a haunting performance by never letting the audience *catch* her performing.

Elliott's portrayal, in truth, was a great argument for more local stage venues the size of the

Green Room, as you felt Artie's sadness, resentment, and self-effacing humor through the tiniest shadings in expression and timbre; the actress achieved extraordinary effects by seeming to do next to nothing at all. Minute by minute, Elliott was firmly committed to her role - she didn't utter a single sentence that sounded false - and a few of her readings were almost shockingly fine; even when Blessing's dialogue veered toward the melancholic, Elliott's level-headed yet wistful deliveries scraped off the sentimentality.

A more presentational presence than her co-stars, McPeters didn't appear quite as relaxed in her monologues, and before speaking, frequently took a second-long pause that somewhat marred the play's conversational flow. (Friday's *Eleemosynary* performance was one of those rare times I wished theatre were more like film, as an editor could have easily tightened the work by simply snipping out those empty moments.) Yet despite coming off as a little stiff - her character was one of the more physically and emotionally
reserved
eccentrics I've seen on stage - McPeters did create a singular figure whom the audience was alert to. Delivered so sensibly, Dorothea's utterings had their own kind of daffy logic, and the actress was especially good when squabbling with Artie; their repartee had the convincing, passive-aggressive fervor of a mother-daughter argument that seems to have been continuing for decades.

Eleemosynary was filled with such recognizably familial moments, and Bertelsen, with his graceful, unfussy staging, appeared keenly aware of the play's many missed (and occasionally realized) connections. The most invigorating connection made on Friday night, though, wasn't between the show's actresses, but rather between the Green Room performers and their attentive, enthusiastic audience; the venue may have changed, but the building, thankfully, is as safe a haven as it ever was.

Eleemosynary's Susan McPeters - alongside Christopher Thomas, Erika Thomas, and Jonathan Turner - also performs in the Green Room's March 1 Cabaret Night at 7 and 9 p.m. For information, call (309)786-5660.