

Written by Mike Schulz  
Wednesday, 16 July 2008 02:38

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You know a comedy is in trouble when its most engaging scene features an elderly woman's description of her escape from a German concentration camp. You know a comedy is in *serious* trouble when it uses that description merely to goose its tinny excuse for a plot.

Nancy Pahl Gilsenan's *Any Famous Last Words?*, the new presentation at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, is a comedy that keeps threatening to say something significant, particularly in regard to the respect that a writer owes her or his subjects. But the piece proves to be so confused and unfocused that it might as well not be saying anything at all. Again and again, fundamentally important questions about an author's ethics are raised only to be immediately discarded, and legitimately dramatic recitations that seem designed to shame the play's protagonist - such as its Holocaust remembrance, and a later speech by a dumpster-scavenging octogenarian - are listened to and promptly ignored. Richmond Hill's latest isn't thought-provoking so much as positively baffling.

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The production finds playwright Lucy Sisson (Jackie Skiles) landing in the hospital after accidentally lodging a Cornish-hen bone in her throat. Her eccentric-poet friend, Sada (Barbara McAbee), is there to keep her company, but it's not long before this seemingly devoted pal begins hectoring Lucy for her questionable playwriting tactics: Has she, in fact, forged a theatrical career by usurping the life stories of others without their consent? And through Lucy's and Sada's conversations, and hospital encounters with a woman Lucy previously dramatized and a woman she *might* dramatize (both played by Sandy Stoltenberg), we get our answer: Yup.

Despite the navel-gazing, masturbatory nature of much of the dialogue - Sada is given numerous lines describing how gifted and successful our playwright-heroine is - Gilsenan's setup isn't uninteresting, which makes her inept handling of it all the more maddening. Sada chides Lucy for her responsibility to those she writes about, while Lucy counters that she's actually doing her inspirations a service. Neither, though, appears all that *invested* in the debate; Sara continues to stroke her friend's ego, and Lucy appears impervious to any kind of self-examination - she listens to that harrowing concentration-camp account with a bemused look of, "Hmm ... how can I pilfer  
*this*  
... ?"



*Any Famous Last Words?* could be played for ironic dark comedy, I guess, with its heroine who steadfastly refuses to better herself. But nothing about Joseph R. DePauw's direction or Skiles' amiable performance suggests that we're meant to find Lucy anything but endearing, and Gilsenan doesn't exactly display an inventive comedic mind; her idea of a running gag is to have Lucy mutter "*Damn it, Sada*" more than a dozen times, and the sound of an off-stage toilet flushing really hasn't been amusing since the heyday of

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*All in the Family*

. (Though several of Friday night's audience members would likely disagree). Gilsenan is the co-author of the stage versions of

*A Separate Peace*

and

*Ordinary People*

, and

*Any Famous Last Words?*

is just a little less funny than

*A Separate Peace*

and

*Ordinary People*

.

Not that its playwright doesn't try. (And *boy* is she trying.) But what are we to make of the supposedly comic scenes with Lucy's ineffectual family (David Bailey, Elizabeth Buzard, and Bailey O'Neil), who are so tangential that they exist merely to show that this talented, successful playwright is also a wonderful, and *unappreciated*, wife and mother? (Gilsenan's implied narcissism knows no bounds.) Why give Sada a saucy flirtation with a friendly doctor (the invaluable Spiro Bruskas) when the character vanishes after his first scene? What's with Lucy's nurse (Cara DeMarlie), who seems perfectly sensible, yet has been saddled with the bizarre - and bizarrely inconsistent - character tic of entering and exiting rooms backwards? (God bless DeMarlie, though; her hilarious readings of "

*Good*

girl" when collecting Lucy's urine samples are fabulously condescending.)

*Any Famous Last Words?*

appears to be a comedy only because of these random throwaways and the punctuation mark in the title; even the leading ladies' repartee is less witty than generically bitchy, and the timing isn't sharp enough for the bitchiness to generate many laughs.

Richmond Hill's latest features some nice elements. Angie Keeney, with her lovely down-turned smile, is a warm, agreeable presence as a kindly nun, and Stoltenberg delivers her Holocaust monologue with a pained, half-whispered directness that creates a deserving hush in the audience; she completely outclasses the play she's in. (Stoltenberg also earns bonus points for undertaking a second role with what I'm assuming was late notice, as the program lists an absent Tikesha Wiggins among its performers.)

Yet *Any Famous Last Words?* is still a bummer. At one point in Act I, Sada discusses the underwhelmed reactions to her poetry, and opines,

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"Even critics  
*especially c*

## Playwright's Play Rights: "Any Famous Last Words?," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre thru July 20

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ritics - do not understand art." The line gets a laugh, and despite the awkward grammar, *should* get a laugh. But speaking as a critic? I may not know art, but I sure know what I don't like.

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