

Showmance: "Who Am I This Time?," at Scott Community College through April 4

Written by Mike Schulz

Tuesday, 31 March 2009 06:00



Scott Community College's *Who Am I This Time?* runs just shy of 45 minutes, and on Saturday evening, I would've been more than happy if the production ended not with a curtain call, but an intermission, followed by a second act in which the cast performed the same show all over again.

I'm not sure I can adequately describe the sheer, ingratiating *charm* of Scott's latest stage offering, because its delicate innocence is just a stone's throw away from complete naïveté; to praise the piece as much as I think it deserves is to risk vastly

over

praising it, and setting up expectations that this elegant little comedy can't meet. Yet I found Cari Anne Cooney's directorial debut so deeply sweet and lightly, unexpectedly touching that it affected me in ways I was totally unprepared for.

Admittedly, your enjoyment will be enhanced if, like the play's characters, you're a little in love with theatre. Based on Kurt Vonnegut Jr.'s 1961 short story, *Who Am I This Time?*

is narrated by George Johnson (Doug Westwood), the director for an amateur-theatre company in North Crawford, California. Casting for his forthcoming production of August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*

, George finds a perfect male lead in Harry Nash (Patrick Joslyn), a thunderously gifted but pathologically shy actor who only springs to life when on stage. (Off-stage, Harry has a tendency to mumble, stutter, and trip over furniture.) And George

thinks

he's found the perfect female lead in Helene Shaw (Dani Helmich), a good-natured, new-to-town telephone operator whose natural poignancy, the director believes, makes up for her lack of stage experience (and, based on Helene's initially awkward audition, lack of acting talent).



Helene, however, blossoms when reading opposite Harry, and so does playwright Christopher Sergel's adaptation; once *Miss Julie*'s stars begin to fall for one another, with Harry only able to

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express his feelings through Strindberg's text, this slight tale begins to touch on grand themes of love and loneliness and fate, and the search for truth within the artifice of the stage. Not having read Vonnegut's story, I have no idea if the author's vision of small-town romance and theatrical passion is as cheerful and optimistic as this production suggests. (It sure ain't *Slaughterhouse Five*

.) But Scott's presentation of *Who Am I This Time?*

is a quiet marvel of hopefulness, and given Cooney's obviously assured hand with actors, one performed with invigorating subtlety and humor.

When your character is introduced as the most brilliant performer anyone has ever seen, obviously there's a lot to live up to. But Joslyn, to his great credit, doesn't sink under the weight of his borderline-impossible role. He flourishes. Aggressively focused as *Miss Julie's* manservant, Jean, the actor gives a thorough approximation of someone who fills a role so completely that he finds himself rather lost after the curtain falls; Joslyn makes the dichotomy between Harry's stage bravado and personal introversion richly, comedically endearing.

He also finds a beautiful performance partner in Helmich, who seems just about perfectly cast as the bashful yet determined Helene. Portraying a woman who, for much of the play's length, feels far more than she's able to express, Helmich is a radiant and effortlessly engaging presence who registers heartbreak and joy with inspiring ease. You never witness any overt Acting on her part - even when playing Miss Julie - yet Helmich's readings are always smart and sharp, and she elicits extraordinary empathy; you really *want* Helene to find her happiness, and want Harry to realize why he and North Crawford's theatre company both deserve her.



Who Am I This Time? does include passages in which the deliberate innocence and simplicity threaten to make it seem simple-minded

; at times, particularly during George's asides to the audience, Sergel's adaptation plays a bit like a Vonnegut children's show. And there are a few head-scratching details, such as when five actors are seen taking a

Miss Julie

curtain call. (Strindberg's play has only three characters.)

But beginning with its pre-show music, which features hauntingly pretty piano renditions of

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Andrew Lloyd Webber tunes, this production is such a big-hearted celebration of theatre, and even of *life*, that it's utterly irresistible, and everyone on stage seems caught up in the spirit: There are ingratiatingly sincere and unforced performances by Jessie Adams Foster and Sonya Wommack, entertaining bits of banter between Sara Bolet, Genie Efram, Kirsten Hanford, the terrific dry comic Joe Sager, and Chasity Foster (quite funny as an excitable theatre dweeb), and a wonderfully friendly tour guide in Westwood. (As their resemblance is uncanny, I can only assume that Doug is the brother of area actor Ryan Westwood, both of whom exude wonderfully genuine earnestness.) I had an absolute blast at Scott's latest; after its finale, I didn't want to applaud the production so much as I wanted to *hug* it.

Who Am I This Time? is being performed through April 4 in Scott Community College's Student Life Center, located through Door 5, off Parking Lot D. For information, call (563)441-4339.