

Army Brats: "Biloxi Blues," at the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre through August 2

Written by Mike Schulz
Monday, 27 July 2009 09:09

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As the second in a three-part series of autobiographical works, Neil Simon's *Biloxi Blues* is, I think, something truly rare: a play that not only succeeds independently of its precursor (*Brighton Beach Memoirs*) and follow-up (*Broadway Bound*), but that's a smarter, funnier, stronger piece than either of its trilogy partners. Even those of us who are casually dismissive of the playwright's style generally agree that this military-themed outing showcases Simon at his absolute finest; the drama is lightly poignant and unforced, and the jokes - and there are dozens of great ones - seem to spring naturally from personality and situation. (In a wonderful break from his punchline-driven norm, Simon's characters here *don't* all sound interchangeable.)

Yet until attending the Clinton Area Showboat Theatre's current production of *Biloxi Blues*, I had no idea that this material that reads so well would - at least under director Jalayne Riewerts' guidance - play even *better*

. (You certainly don't get that impression from Mike Nichols' synthetic 1988 film adaptation starring Matthew Broderick.) A couple years back, in the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's take on Simon's *California Suite*

, Riewerts softened and humanized the author's slapstick vignettes so that the rat-a-tat relentlessness of the gags didn't feel oppressive. Working with a far richer script, the director performs similar stage wizardry in the Showboat's latest, eliciting hilarious and authentic portrayals from its cast, and ensuring that the staging is as fresh as the acting. If I was a local

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theatre producer and was looking for someone to helm a Simon play, I'm thinking I'd call Riewerts
first

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With its director using only a few makeshift set pieces to suggest an Army barracks, a mess hall, a cheap hotel, and other locales, *Biloxi Blues* opens in 1943, with our protagonist, Eugene Jerome (Drew Simendinger), in a locomotive car bound for Mississippi. In the first of many frequent asides to the audience, this Brooklyn innocent and practiced smart-ass tells us that he and his motley crew of traveling companions are en route to basic-training camp, and that he's determined to accomplish three goals before World War II's end: "Become a writer, not get killed, and lose my virginity." It will give nothing away to say that Jerome succeeds in all three. His path to fulfillment, though, is a bumpy one, and provides the young man with an unexpected education in machismo, racism, homophobia, and the complex motivations of the barking drill instructor, Sergeant Toomey (Rob Engelson).



In outline, *Biloxi Blues* is your standard military comedy with your standard, instantly recognizable character types: the Neolithic he-man (Alex Fenzel), the fast-talking weisenheimer (Nick Divarco), the well-meaning doofus (Dale Hawes), the intellectual nebbish (Joshua Sohn). Yet Simon has surprises in store. (And, as you'll discover, so does the show's director.) The playwright's early pigeonholing of his characters turns out to be a supremely clever act of bait-and-switch; he makes you, like Eugene, anticipate nothing but comedic stereotypes, only to throw you for a loop when these men behave in ways that routinely upend your expectations. Simon is wise and generous enough here to suggest that even seemingly one-dimensional figures can be loaded with contradictions - Jerome himself, as we come to realize, is no saint - and while the banter is frequently hysterical, it's hysterical because the gags come from a place of honesty; no one's character is sacrificed for the sake of an easy joke.

It's Riewerts' direction, however, that turns what might've been "merely" first-rate Simon into imaginative and memorable Simon. Choreographing the scenic shifts to the steady, thumping march of actors and stagehands - a stylistic choice that turns the adjustment of set pieces into an exactingly (and ingeniously) regimented activity - the director both underlines *Biloxi Blues'* military theme and keeps its momentum humming even when nothing of particular importance is happening. And her decision to occasionally employ overlapping dialogue and shrewdly considered ad libs pays off incredibly well, allowing the author's dialogue to sound a way it rarely does in stage productions: spontaneous. This Showboat presentation finds Riewerts

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honoring Simon and transcending him in practically the same breath, and nearly actor for actor, the same could be said of its cast.

As Jerome, Simendinger does something here that I thought would've been impossible: He made me forget all about Matthew Broderick within his first three minutes. (A considerable feat, considering that the role seems specifically written for Broderick's cadences.) A natural charmer with a gift for wisecracks, Simendinger proves to be an effortless comedian who delivers his best lines as if he's embarrassed to be *thinking* them, much less uttering them; Jerome's pre-tryst confession that he "put powder and Aqua Velva in and under every conceivable part of my body" becomes a riotously delicate admission of shame-based pride. And the performer is just as inventive physically, turning the act of blowing his nose into a bedsheet into a detailed expression of Jerome's awkwardness, politeness, and almost paralyzing fear.



Simendinger is sensational here, and he gets a terrific rapport going with his fellow ensemble members (among them two outstanding actresses, Kate Hennies and Claire Barnhart, whose minor roles are performed with major relish). Hawes gets you laughing hard - and often - very early in the production, and only lets up when his boisterous Carney quiets down for a moment of understated self-examination or a lovely bit of crooning; it's a marvelous portrayal. Divarco's Seldridge is an energizing presence with lightning-fast comic rhythms, Kris Doss makes for an engaging Hennesey (*Biloxi Blues'* least developed, most purely functional role), and while Fenzel could stand to be more threatening - his Wykowski, often referred to as an animal, comes across as an all-too-*nice* animal - the performer's ease and relaxedness is completely winning.

With each new production this summer, the dynamically gifted Sohn seems to get better and better and better, and his tormented Epstein is a true tour de force of brilliantly voiced antagonism and elegant restraint. (There's nothing remotely show-offy about Sohn's dramatic *coup de grâce* here, in which Epstein details a harrowing encounter in the latrine.) And portraying the foul-mouthed hard case Sergeant Toomey, Engelson is - yet again - reliably magnificent.

As with Sohn, there's nothing showboat-y about this Showboat performer; Engelson pulls off his effects so simply and unobtrusively that they barely *qualify* as effects. Cutting down his charges

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with devastating put-downs and opting to emphasize the words

before

Toomey's expletives - which makes his readings of the expletives themselves all the funnier - the actor is in spectacular form in

Biloxi Blues

, yet never so outsize that he overshadows his less seasoned co-stars. Engelson delivers a wonderful, giving performance, and offers a solid example here of a dedicated talent working at peak invention. Just like Riewerts. And, in this particular play, just like Simon.

For tickets and information, call (563)242-6760 or visit ClintonShowboat.org .