Written by Mike Schulz
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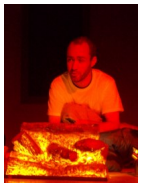

Scott Community College debuted its fall theatre offering(s) on Thursday, a pair of John Pielmeier one-acts under the blanket title *Haunted Lives*. And while I'd prefer this article not be read as a traditional review - because, for understandable reason, the production wasn't really in any kind of shape to *be* reviewed - I'll preface with perhaps the highest compliment I can give its participants: They made it through.

The lead-up to director Steve Flanigin's hour-long presentation was actually quite good, mostly because Mother Nature played along nicely; what better evening for a couple of theatrical ghost stories than the grim, chilly, rainy night we endured on Thursday? (During his pre-show announcements, Flanigin accurately described the outdoor conditions as "perfectly atmospheric weather" for the performance.) Plus, prior to entering Scott's playing area, we attendees were each handed a miniature bag of trick-or-treat candy along with our programs, and I don't think I'm alone in thinking that audience goodwill will always be enhanced by the gift of free chocolate.

But beyond his friendly greeting and smart comment about the weather, Flanigin also had some unfortunate news to report, as one of the production's original performers - cast in both of *Haunted Lives*
'
one-acts - had to be replaced during the week of the show's opening. Consequently, substituting actress Sarah Murphy would not only be performing her roles (both of them

male
roles) without benefit of proper rehearsal time, but with scripts in hand.

This turn of events, in truth, wasn't all *that* unfortunate. Murphy was, and is, a major trouper for stepping into *Haunted Lives* so late in the process, and unanticipated mishaps of this sort can make the theatre-going experience - for the patrons, at least - a lot of fun, if occasionally nerve-racking fun. The problem, though, is that when a performer is forced to read from a script without knowing what lines are coming next, or why they're being said, it's oftentimes torturously difficult for an audience to discern character and plot; the dialogue becomes just a bunch of words strung together without meaning, motivation, or context.

So I can't really give you my impression of *Haunted Lives*' first one-act, simply titled *A Ghost Story* . Given the (understandably) halting conversational rhythms and dead air, and the (inopportune) necessity of turning a male character to female, it was all I could do to follow the storyline, and I'm *still* not entirely sure what happened. Peilmeier's tale concerns two hikers (Murphy and Jonathan Kasch) who stumble upon a deserted cabin and encounter a mysterious stranger (Nichole Gill), but I'm guessing the piece wouldn't have made much sense even if acted to perfection. The connection between the spooky stories that characters tell to pass time and the spooky story Pielmeier
himself
is telling seems tenuous at best - the confusing voice-over narration, meanwhile, exacerbates the problem - and the overt theatricality of both the script and the production, with stage lights dimming and popping on again at regular intervals, doesn't suck you in so much as distance you from the material.

It should be said, though, that Kasch boasts an impressively relaxed, naturalistic stage presence and appears to possess strong acting instincts, and that the scratching sounds from inside the cabin's closet are evocatively creepy, even if the *source* of that scratching winds up being a disappointment. That is, if I
understood
it correctly.

Haunted Lives' second part, *A Witch's Brew*, seemed the more successful piece, partly because Murphy was clearly more acquainted with that script, and partly because this script is at least somewhat coherent. (Happily, the lighting also stayed consistent, with the lovely orange glow of designer Nicole Ketelaar's fireplace subtly illuminating the darkness.) In this outing, brother Daed (Kasch), sister Jule (Bethany Jones), and friend Tucker (Murphy) gather to mourn the passing of the family matriarch, and end up playing the familiar Halloween-party game in which foodstuff is passed around a circle, with the game's initiator insisting that peeled grapes are eyes, spaghetti is brains, et cetera.

You've probably already figured out the punchline, and much of the show's staging is as confounding as Pielmeier's one-act is obvious. (Why, for example, does Tucker stand and ask where the light switch is, and then not move for two minutes before repeating, "Where is that light switch?!" Is she expecting it to come to
her
?) But at a mere 15 minutes, the piece barely has the chance to wear out its welcome, and playing broader stereotypes than
A Ghost Story
allowed, the actors look like they're having a pretty good time; Jones appears especially delighted to be delivering Jule's recurring shriek-and-giggle. Thursday's
Haunted Lives
was less a performance than a mostly shaky dress rehearsal, but I extend kudos to its cast for carrying on under trying circumstances. The show must go on, after all, and whatever its failings, at least Thursday's
did
.

Haunted Lives *is being performed through October 31 in Scott Community College's Student Life Center, located through Door 5, off Parking Lot D. For information, call (563)441-4339.*