

## The Pluck of the Irish: "The O'Conner Girls," at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre through March 21

Written by Thom White

Monday, 15 March 2010 07:51

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If there's one word I'd use to best describe Playcrafters Barn Theatre's current production, it would be "nice." And while that can be taken as an unflattering adjective, for *The O'Conner Girls* I mean it as a positive one; I left the opening-night performance with a smile on my face, one awash with the sweet nostalgia and dash of humor that put it there.

*The O'Conner Girls* takes place over the course of two days, during which twin sisters Martha (Lisa Kahn) and Liz (Pamela Crouch) - having just buried their father - are now helping their mother, Sara (Jan Golz), clean out the house. Martha spent the last year taking care of her father, losing sleep along with any semblance of a personal life. Liz did her part by sending money home, even after losing her husband and her job. Now, however, Sara is ready to sell the family home and head off to Europe, and *The O'Conner Girls* finds the three women sharing these and other secrets with one another, secrets that end up changing their lives.

Written by Katie Forgette, the script does not offer new ideas or creative plotlines. Instead, its strength is in its realistic dialogue. Rather than delivering the pretentious, overly dramatic lines you often find in weaker scripts, or the exquisitely poetic but lofty monologues of stronger plays, these characters speak as real people do. The effect created is like a slice of life, where it's easier to believe we're actually looking in on a real family in a real situation, rather than something staged.

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In her directorial debut at Playcrafters, Susan Zelnio crafts a production that embraces that sense of realism, as do her leads. Golz has a way of taking lines that may not have been written with humor and delivering them with an inflection that creates a bit of off-the-cuff, slightly sarcastic fun. Kahn offers a sweetly sincere performance, adding just enough hints at Martha's being overburdened and tired; her facial expressions are a bit overdone when simply reacting to others, but this is arguably the most unaffected performance I've yet seen from Kahn. The same could be said of Crouch (although her performance in the Harrison Hilltop Theatre's *Steel Magnolias*, also featuring Kahn, was quite enjoyable). In past shows, I've seen Crouch overdo her performances, but here it was refreshing to see her let the lines simply flow, rather than using them to force a character.



Don Faust portrays Dr. David Stevens, a longtime family friend and secret love interest of Martha, and seems to be overly aware of the audience, often delivering his gestures toward those watching the play rather than those performing in it. As in previous productions in which I've seen him (most notably Harrison Hilltop's *The Graduate*), it's apparent that Faust likes to perform and enjoys pleasing an audience. Here, however, his tendency to play to the audience is a distraction, although - as it's confined to his body language - at least it's a minor one; Faust's line deliveries project a more honest nature, and make his Dr. Stevens a simple, likable man.

It's Judy Luster as Aunt Martha, however, who almost steals the show. Luster doesn't seem to be afraid to play things big - from dramatic highs and lows in inflection to uninhibited physical movement - yet doesn't allow her performance to drift into caricature, keeping it believable. And she's just so darn cute! She had me wishing her Martha was my aunt, too.

Scenically, *The O'Conner Girls* marks the first play I've seen at Playcrafters where the performers are not forced to pantomime opening a downstage door. (I loathe seeing actors pretend to turn a doorknob or slide open a window that is not actually there, especially when it's the only set piece they and the audience are forced to imagine.) For this production, Zelnio, who also serves as set designer, chose to include a hinged decorative board (and actual knob) to represent a full door without blocking anyone's view. It's such a clever piece that I actually took a moment to marvel at it ... only to be disappointed when, during its first usage, Golz closed the door and reached up to flip on a pretend light switch. Sigh.

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As it concerns an Irish Catholic family, *The O'Conner Girls* would seem an appropriate production for the days surrounding St. Patrick's Day. Yet while, for me, it's preferable to a mug of green beer, it doesn't matter that Playcrafters chose to stage this play during the holiday - this production would be just as nice any time of the year.

*For more information and tickets, call (309) 762-0330 or visit [Playcrafters.com](http://Playcrafters.com) .*

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