

Sister Act: "Marvin's Room," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre through April 25

Written by Thom White
Monday, 19 April 2010 06:00



Saturday night's performance of *Marvin's Room* marks the first time I'd seen a Richmond Hill Players production. When previously invited to see one of their shows, I cited reasons not to attend, mostly balking at the seemingly long drive out to Geneseo. I spent much of Saturday's intermission chastising myself for not making the shorter-than-expected trip sooner.

Writer Scott McPherson's *Marvin's Room* is a play about our need to take care of one another, particularly in illness. Bessie (Jackie Madunic) lives with and attends to her bedridden, elderly father, Marvin (a character we never actually see in the play), and her fragile Aunt Ruth (Sandy Stoltenberg). After being diagnosed with leukemia, Bessie turns to her estranged sister, Lee (Angela Rathman), hoping one of Lee's sons - Hank (Jordan Lipes) and Charlie (Jared Lipes) - are a match for a bone-marrow transplant. Their reunion also provides the chance for Lee to reconcile with Hank, recently confined to a mental institution after burning down their house.



In her director's notes, Jennifer Kingry writes that she's wanted to stage *Marvin's Room* in the Quad Cities for more than a decade, after first seeing the 1996 film version of the play. Now, the Richmond Hill Players have given her the chance to present this story that hits so close to home for Kingry, who says she missed seeing the play in its heyday (following its 1991 off-Broadway premiere) while dealing with family illness herself. And the barn atop the bluff's theatre-in-the-round seems an ideal setting for the show, as Kingry incorporates three of the theatre's corner aisles into the set - each designed as a room adjoining the main stage - and consequently expands the stage beyond its traditional borders.

Madunic tones down her usual on-stage exuberance for her subtle take on Bessie, a humble, cheerful woman not interested in stealing the spotlight. (In truth, I've yet to be *unimpressed* by a Madunic performance.) With her stage confidence helping to create a strong yet conflicted mother who's uncertain of the choices she's making in raising Hank, it's easy to see why Rathman has been a regular at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre for 18 years. Jordan Lipes, meanwhile, could easily have 18 years with Richmond Hill ahead of him, given his performance as Hank. His brooding, angry resentment of his mother is well-played, but his scenes with Madunic - portraying a broken young man yearning to connect with *someone*

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- are the production's most touching.



Marvin's Room marks the stage debut of Jordan's younger brother, Jared, who is refreshingly unassuming, lacking the cute-but-forced qualities of many debuting young actors. Stoltenberg's Aunt Ruth delivers the perfect amount of lovable absentmindedness, while Faith Adams' nursing-home director has so much Southern charm that it sticks with you well beyond her single scene. Bill Hudson bumbles just enough as the seemingly unqualified Dr. Wally, with Tamara Ritt offering a simple, serious performance as Dr. Charlotte that turns seriously *funny*

with the single drag of a cigarette. And while Eric Noyd's Bob is overdone, at least it makes sense when his dim-witted character talks about the joys of taking lithium.

While enjoying the quality of Jean Melillo's costumes and Kingry's lights, there were a few glitches during Saturday night's performance; in the most obvious one, a technical malfunction caused someone to literally yell "Ring, ring!" from backstage the first time Dr. Wally received a call. (Thankfully, the phone actually *did* ring the next time someone phoned the doctor.) The performances were also not without glitches, with a majority of the actors stumbling over at least a line or two.

All in all, though, Richmond Hill Players' *Marvin's Room* is quite enjoyable. The performers' interpretation of the script is just touching enough to move you, but without leaving you with an overwhelming sadness. It also guarantees I'll be back to catch future productions, having been impressed by this one.

For tickets and information, call (309) 944-2244 or visit RHPplayers.com .

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