

Romper Room: "Funny Valentines," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre through June 13

Written by Jill Walsh
Monday, 07 June 2010 06:00

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Character confusion makes for an enjoyable, lighthearted comedy in Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's current summer offering, *Funny Valentines*. And though the opening-night performance had a slow and somewhat shaky start in terms of line deliveries, the actors quickly settled into their roles and let their characters' quirks shine through.

D.R. Andersen's script concerns Andy Robbins (Nathan Johnson), a children's book illustrator whose professional successes were the result of his collaborations with his now-ex-wife, Ellen Robbins (Stacy McKean Herrick). When Andy's agent, Howard Williams (Archie Williams), and television program-director, Zan Wilkinson (Kady Patterson), show up with a proposal to create a TV empire centered on "Beanie," the Robbins' popular bear character, Andy has to decide whether to take the money and run or side with his television-despising ex-wife, who's also eight months pregnant with his child. (*Phew.*)

And that's just the groundwork, laid out in the first scene in Andy's New York bachelor apartment, before the *really* funny stuff happens

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Director Jalayne Riewerts did well in utilizing this intimate space and making it feel claustrophobic during the later scenes, when all five characters, including Ellen's mother (Jackie Skiles), are packed onto a futon and a single, swiveling chair, and trying to politely conceal particular secrets from each other. (The scene is made even more hilarious by Zan's ill-timed wardrobe choice.)

This was also the scene that best showcased the talents of the actors as a group. The comedic timing was rapid and natural and spot-on here; there were none of the awkward, unbelievable movements and behaviors - a random bout of sneezing to motivate a character toward the bathroom, for example - that punctuated a few of the transitional scenes.

In terms of the individual actors, I thought Johnson was a good fit for his character - a man who's predicted to be "six years old for the rest of [his] life." His facial expressions, particularly the open-mouthed glee he displays when excited, emitted a nice, natural quality of innocence. I didn't care as much for his - or Riewerts' - decision for him to kick his legs in the air like a child having a temper tantrum; the gesture was unnecessary considering Johnson's ability to show his "childish" side in unique, more-organic ways. (A good example of this was his hasty stapling together of his shirt, an act performed because Andy doesn't want to bother with buying new buttons.)

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