

In-Laws & Disorder: "Squabbles," at the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse through August 28

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

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Wednesday night's preview performance of the Circa '21 Dinner Playhouse's *Squabbles* was never funnier than when its two elder characters were engaged in the titular activity.

Unfortunately, they didn't squabble as much as the show's title might lead you to believe.

Fortunately,

however, the parts of author Marshall Karp's play that are low on humor are high on sentiment, and created a far more touching experience than I expected.

Directed by Jim Hesselman, *Squabbles* is set in the home of Jerry and Alice Sloan (Adam Michael Lewis and Kimberly Kurtenbach). Alice's father, Abe (Michael Kennedy), is already living with them in their three-bedroom house when a fire destroys the home of Jerry's mother, Mildred (Autumn O'Ryan), forcing her to move in with them, too. Abe and Mildred, however, don't exactly get along. (Abe would repeatedly tell you about the time Mildred came after him with a knife... at their children's *wedding*, no less.) And putting them together under the same roof brings additional tension to a home that'll soon house another resident, in the form of Jerry's and Alice's first child.



The cast is a veritable who's-who of local talents who have made area names for themselves with their consistently strong performances. Lewis brings his usual brand of delightful silliness to

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his role, which also allows him to showcase some of his singing ability and piano-playing skills, and Kurtenbach counters him with a fairly straightforward, well-crafted performance, sort of an Abbott to Lewis' Costello. Don Hepner, a familiar face to Circa '21 patrons, elicits an easy smile with his jolly turn as Abe's card-playing friend, Sol. Jan Schmall - whom you may recognize as one of Circa '21's Bootleggers - drops her normally bright smile and bubbly personality as the severe, German-accented, seemingly personality-free Mrs. Fisher, the hired nanny.

It's O'Ryan and Kennedy, however, who steal the show - Kennedy especially. With his acerbic tone, Kennedy commands the stage, and is the highlight of scene after scene due to his dynamically bitter inflection and comically caustic delivery. And it's to O'Ryan's credit that she can hold her own acting opposite this tremendous talent - and, matching wits with Kennedy, hold her own she *does*. While Kennedy shines with the humor, though, O'Ryan's strongest scenes are the sentimental ones, in which she exudes a joy that just seems to bubble up from within her, enacting Mildred's delight in - and, at times, dependence on - Abe's presence.



Of course, there's also the home in which they all live (and fight), and designer Susan Holgersson's set can best be described as lived-in; she's decorated the set with knick-knacks, pictures, plants, and statuettes in a way that isn't catalogue-ready. (Or, more appropriately, *stage* *ready*.) Instead, it's notably realistic, and while its structure isn't as grand as it was for Circa '21's recent

Whodunit... the Musical

, it's equally impressive in design and construction. With its fireplace, split-level living room, pillar-flanked front door, hardwood steps, and open-kitchen layout, I'd move into it in a heartbeat.

While it has fewer laughs than I expected, Hesselman manages to highlight *Squabbles'* truly touching moments, and when it is funny, it's

really

funny. You just might laugh until you cry.

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For tickets and information, call (309)786-7733, extension 2, or visit Circa21.com.

Thom White covers entertainment news for WQAD Quad Cities News 8.