

Written by Thom White

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A day after seeing it, I still can't decide whether I like playwright Jim Leonard Jr.'s *And They Dance Real Slow in Jackson*

, but I do know that I appreciate director Patti Flaherty's efforts in staging this nonlinear tale for New Ground Theatre. During Friday's performance, I struggled to follow the action, as Leonard's script confusingly jumps back and forth in time. Thankfully, however, Flaherty's directorial work helps create some clarity to the "when" with which we're dealing.

At the center of *And They Dance Real Slow in Jackson* is Elizabeth Willow (Jamie Em Behncke), a polio sufferer wheelchair-bound since her first year of life. The plot takes us from her childhood to her adulthood, though not quite in that order, as Elizabeth struggles to make and keep friends, fights for her independence, and faces the occasional horrors of being the town oddity. It also explores small-town life in a religiously motivated society that shuns change and all things different and/or outside the teachings of the church.

Behncke's commitment to her role is remarkably thorough. From the earnestness of her younger Elizabeth to the frustrations of her older self, Behncke's passion and energy never once seemed to wane through the course of the evening. There was a moment, on Friday, when her character – having had enough of her inability to walk and the emotional and

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relational hardships that accompanied it – threw herself to the floor, and Behncke's anguished, defeated cries as she eventually climbed back into her wheelchair stunned the audience into absolute silence. (Well, almost: One patron in the front row did interrupt the quiet by repeatedly, and loudly, blowing her nose.) It's also worth noting that Behncke never moves her legs until the curtain call; even when she's exiting the stage in darkness while not in her wheelchair, Behncke crawls off with just the use of her arms to pull her out of sight.

While I think more could've been done to delineate time periods and characters, Flaherty's cast members show strength in their abilities to change mannerisms and vocal inflections, in order to clearly separate their various roles. (Four actors play numerous townspeople, from children to adults.) Joshua Kahn effectively shades each of his characters, and is most touching, and most conflicted, as Elizabeth's catechism study partner, Skeeter. Other than the unseen Zelda, who is also physically handicapped, Skeeter is perhaps Elizabeth's only true friend, and Kahn nicely layers the young man's friendly fondness for the girl with subtle attempts to build a wall against any potential romance.



Kylie Jansen and Jennifer Winn play the town's girls and women with equally absorbing stage confidence. While Jansen reminded me that she's a young actress to watch as she blossoms through her stage performances – her work in New Ground's *100 Saints You Should Know* last summer was stunning – Winn again revealed her dependable strength in her craft, delivering another remarkable effort in a stage career boasting notable role after notable role. (Winn's portrayals in Quad City Music Guild's

Suessical

and the Harrison Hilltop Theatre's

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?

are among my favorites.)

And while his characters are less nuanced than those of the other ensemble players, no one makes his roles quite as individualized as David Cabassa, whose Moose-lodge member is particularly distinct. With his high-waisted posture and elderly(-sounding) voice, I found his efforts to be a bit too silly for my tastes. However, I was clearly in the minority, as Cabassa's second-act monologue as that older gentleman elicited the largest laughs from the majority of Friday's audience.

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Rounding out the cast, Susan Perrin-Sallak – whom I adored in New Ground's *Souvenir* – is well-paired with Michael Carron in the roles of Elizabeth's parents; Perrin-Sallak's purse-lipped, stern matron and Carron's liquor-smuggling, easygoing, dream-filled father seem to be the quintessential small-town couple, with the father laboring in a dull job while the mother rules the roost with good Christian morals. (Perrin-Sallak is particularly strong when Elizabeth's pleas for independence push her to anger, and when heightened concern for her daughter cracks this loving mother's prim exterior.)

Michael McPeters' lighting design also strikes me as noteworthy, especially his concept for the world of Elizabeth's thoughts; when we see Elizabeth's dreams played out on-stage, McPeters lights her with a single spotlight, and places her in a pool of brightness as her mind's tormentors move in and out of the shadows.□

And They Dance Real Slow in Jackson will not be among my favorite scripts, mainly for its hard-to-follow, nonlinear plot progression. It's to both Flaherty's and Behncke's credit, however, that I will long remember New Ground's production of it, given that they handle the material with such obvious respect and passion.

For tickets, call (563)326-7529 or visit NewGroundTheatre.org .