

Written by Thom White
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The Playcrafters Barn Theatre’s production of *Rehearsal for Murder* suffers from poor pacing, but excels in its sincere sentiment and charm. The actors, for the most part, tend to take too many beats between lines, which leads to sometimes-clunky dialogue progression. Still, Friday night’s performance was appealing for its overall emotional effect, and likable for the cast’s ability to move the audience to sympathetic sorrow for the main character’s heartache.

Adapted by D.D. Brooks from the teleplay by Richard Levinson and William Link (the piece was originally produced as a 1982 television movie), *Rehearsal for Murder* focuses on a playwright’s effort to find the murderer of his fiancée, Monica. Gathering the cast and crew of his final play on the anniversary of her apparent suicide, he forces them to read through new scenes he’s written – scenes that may provide motive for each person to have killed his true love – and *Rehearsal for Murder*’s

writers effectively convey the emotion in their work. What they’re guilty of, though, is what I find annoying about most staged mysteries: With crucial information deliberately withheld, it’s not possible for the audience to solve the mystery ourselves.

Yet despite being frustrated by the fact that, once again, playwrights were unfairly tricking us by pulling the old bait-and-switch (something that’s even *admitted* by one character here), I walked away from Playcrafters’ work not minding so much, as director Tom Swegle’s restrained effort

The (Re)Play Is the Thing: “Rehearsal for Murder,” at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre through May 22

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highlights the sad sweetness at the core of the piece.



Mike Kelly carries the weight of that feeling as Alex Dennison, the playwright trying to uncover his fiancée’s killer. In Kelly’s most sincere moment in the play, he finishes describing the night of his love’s death, taking a few beats to reflect on his loss, unaware of anything happening around him. Then, with an intake of air, he awakens from, and shakes off, his emotional interlude, and the moment is stunning for the clarity in which Kelly shows his character’s deep loss with just a look, a pause, and a breath.

It’s worth noting that *Rehearsal for Murder* marks the first time on stage for three of its cast members, as admitted in their program bios. It’s clear that Minnie Winters and Craig Newkirk – as a female police officer and the investigating police lieutenant, respectively – are green actors, but it’s also evident that they will likely improve quickly, given more stage experience. Harrison Wallace, however, appears to be a director’s dream as Lloyd, the director of Dennison’s final play. While his inflections and, especially, his gestures are a touch too exaggerated, it’s a problem many directors have told me they prefer

, as it’s easier to get an actor to tone it down than it is to get him or her to play things bigger. (Wallace isn’t exaggerated to the degree that he falls into caricature, but the role is overplayed enough that it loses a bit of its sincerity.) As for Jordan L. Smith, whose bio only mentions a first-grade credit,

Rehearsal for Murder

is his Playcrafters’ stage debut, and the actor’s “First Man” – a lieutenant in Dennison’s murder-anniversary play – is nicely shaded with self-certainty and daftness.



Of the show’s more veteran performers, Alaina Pascarella’s Ernie, the theatre’s stagehand, is the most amusing character in the play; with her consistent New York accent, Pascarella exudes a nonchalant, tell-it-like-it-is attitude that earned the most laughs on Friday night. Carli Talbott is memorable, too, for her eager but simple-minded assistant Sally, while Sarah Ade and Joshua Kahn offer the production’s most absorbing portrayals as actors in Dennison’s play; the two showcase exceptional talent through strong, nuanced performances and fully crafted characters. Also of note: Nicole Layer’s Monica captures her character’s intended likability; Greg Bouljon’s slightly goofy actor and Liz Blackwell’s confident and wise producer are

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welcome additions; and Anastasiya Bauswell and Bryan Lopez, though in small roles, manage to leave their marks with their subtle comedy styles.

Commendations aside, many of the actors, on Friday, seemed to not wholly understand the motivations behind their lines, altering their meanings and the tones of certain scenes with inflections or emotions that didn't quite match their dialogue. This didn't sink the entire ship, though, as Playcrafters' *Rehearsal for Murder* is worthwhile for its tenderness alone.

For tickets and information, call (309)762-0330 or visit Playcrafters.com.