Written by Thom White
Monday, 18 July 2011 06:04

I've been moved by several productions this year, but by none so deeply as the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's *A Lesson Before Dying.* In fact, I was in tears several times during Friday night's performance, including throughout most of the second act.

Based on the novel by Ernest J. Gaines, playwright Romulus Linney's script focuses on a formally educated African-American teacher, Grant Wiggins, called on to meet daily with Jefferson, a young black man sentenced to death for a murder he did not commit. Linney's drama looks at African-American existence in the South prior to the Civil Rights movement, and explores how the societal structure of the period landed the inmate on death row for fear of telling the truth at his trial, as a black man accusing a white man of committing murder was its own kind of crime at the time.

Director Shellie Moore Guy's take on the material has an appropriately unhurried, Southern-feeling tempo to it, allowing the melancholy of Jefferson's fate and the weight of the black experience to sink in effectively. And while the pacing is leisurely, it's never boring, because Linney's work is so engaging. Forgetting the title (which gives away the ending), I hoped for a reprieve for Jefferson throughout Act I. But when it was made apparent that the inevitable is, indeed, inevitable, I could barely choke back the tears; my throat tightened and the sobs made an effort to escape, because I was so taken with Linney's treatment of an innocent man hopelessly condemned to die.

Playcrafters' offering is sad from the very moment Desmond Grasker's Jefferson walks onto the stage, which is several minutes into the production. Before he even speaks a word, Grasker's dejected, utterly defeated stance as he stands shackled is a powerful image, and both his presence and his performance grow more powerful as the play progresses. Grasker manages to mature his Jefferson, making his character's personal growth quite clear in a way that pierces your heart. From his insolent rage when feeling contempt for the world to his calm, brave demeanor as his execution day approaches, Grasker fully shapes his Jefferson from beginning to end.

Though he has impressive moments of passion, Curtis Wyatt's efforts as Grant are much more subdued; for the most part, his portrayal is even-keeled, but without being flat. It's obvious that his Grant, with his frequently controlled frustration, is a thinker more than a feeler, but when he *does* feel something, Wyatt lets lose with powerful anger. Meanwhile, Wyatt is matched by Teresa Babers as Grant's love interest, Vivian. Also fairly low-key in her approach, Babers interjects forceful moments into her characterization, holding her own in arguments with Wyatt.

As Paul Bonin, the police officer who chaperones Grant's meetings with Jefferson, Mike Kelly offers the most subtle take I've yet seen from him on a local stage. His Paul has a quiet, friendly demeanor, with an obviously amicable attitude toward the black community atypical to the time period. Joseph Obleton, fittingly, shapes a much less likable character in Reverend Moses Ambrose. Vehemently insistent that Jefferson needs God, not lessons in manhood, Obleton brings angry condescension and moral superiority to his preacher.

Sam Splear shows great skill at displaying different aspects of a character with his Sheriff Sam Guidry; first appearing as a gruff, no-nonsense man, Splear later plays him with insincere smiles and overly friendly airs, signifying the sheriff's shift for the sake of public appearance, being that he's up for re-election. And more than anyone, Betty Cosey impressed me with her stage talents. Portraying Emma Glen, Jefferson's godmother, Cosey brings an amusing moxie to the role, while also expertly controlling the flow for every scene in which she appears.

Friday night's audience was not as full as it usually is at the Barn Theatre, which is a shame. *A Lesson Before Dying* is the strongest, most emotional script Playcrafters has yet staged this year.

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