

Written by Mike Schulz  
Monday, 29 August 2011 06:00

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The Timber Lake Playhouse's *'Til Death Do Us Part: Late Nite Catechism 3* opened this past Thursday, and it seems a little rude to describe just how staggeringly hysterical the performance was, because unless you were one of the evening's many other cackling patrons, there's literally no way you'll be seeing the same production I did. In theatre, of course, no two shows are *ever* exactly alike. Yet this one-woman comedy may be a special case in that regard, because not only is

#### *Til Death Do Us Part*

dependent on audience interaction, but several audience members are so directly involved in the proceedings – and so spectacularly, riotously *well*

-involved – that they could make legitimate claims for co-star billing, and maybe even deserved paychecks. (As it stands, they're instead treated to lovely parting gifts.)

I've never seen playwright Maripat Donovan's original *Late Nite Catechism*, although I did catch *Catechism 2* at

Timber Lake in 2005, and this third entry in the series follows much the same blueprint. With the house lights remaining on through the course of the production, we're in the company of a stern, no-nonsense, and quick-witted nun simply referred to as Sister (played here by Mary Zentmyer), who proceeds to give the audience – cast as students in her classroom – the lowdown on selective tenets of Catholicism through lecture, exploration of Bible stories, and visual aids. Yet she refuses to do it solo. At random moments,

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*lots*

of random moments, she'll seek answers to particular questions from the theatre's patrons, and woe to those who give one without first addressing her as "Sister," without using their audible "playground voices," or – as one gentleman on Thursday learned the hard way – without getting rid of their gum.

Beyond the casting of Sister, however, a few major elements differentiated this *Late Nite Catechism* from the one I viewed previously. In that 2005 performance, the audience was initially so reticent about answering Sister's queries that she was forced, awfully early, to bring out the big guns: Timber Lake's ledger of attendees, which gave her the names of everyone in attendance that night, and enabled her to demand replies from specific, oft-embarrassed members of the crowd. Incredibly, though, this tactic wasn't ever required to get

*Catechism 3*

's opening-night patrons in the classroom spirit. There were always volunteers ready and willing to show off their erudition, and some of their responses to Sister's questions were

*so*

nicely phrased that even the sensationally unflappable Zentmyer appeared legitimately impressed. (A young man named Austin Graham gave a marvelously lucid explanation for Galileo's run-ins with the church, and fellow audience member Jean Louise properly defined "sacrament"

*and*

knew what the acronym CCD stood for.)

Yet the bigger difference between *Catechisms 2* and *3* was revealed in *'Til Death Do Us Part's* second half

(Returning to the stage after intermission, Sister smiled at those of us who applauded and said, "Thank you, brown-noses.") Employing the assistance of chosen "volunteers," Sister's classroom was turned into the set for a makeshift,

*Newlywed Game*

-style competition called

*Compatibility*

that pitted two previously introduced couples in the house against each other: Katherine and Richard, married 62 years, and Tara and Ronald, married three. With their backs to each other, the spouses scored points whenever they unknowingly agreed on the "correct" answer to one of Sister's questions – e.g., "Would you rather have pre-marital sex, or meet our Lord and Savior?" (Tara and Ronald, bless 'em, didn't let us down on that one.) And between the hilarity generated by the contestants' participation, the memorable goofs of others, and some occasionally inspired improv from the peanut gallery (one woman told Sister the best way to keep a marriage together was "separate houses"), I was so exhausted from laughing that Zentmyer's curtain call was almost a relief.

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*Almost*

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In truth, I could've watched the performer riff and admonish and banter in her deliriously exaggerated Minnesota accent for many more hours than *'Til Death Do Us Part* allowed. And while some of her scripted material – especially her swats at Sally Struthers and Angelina Jolie – feels a tad tired, absolutely nothing about Zentmyer's portrayal does. Whether joshing with her evening's charges or demonstrating how "Presbyterians" turns into a perfect anagram for a certain pop singer and former Mouseketeer, this actress is

*fast*

, and almost magisterially funny.

Somewhat astonishingly, no director is credited in

*'Til Death Do Us Part*

's program – Timber Lake's season-ender is a touring production presented through Entertainment Events Inc. – but the show is hardly a well-oiled-yet-soulless amusement that runs on autopilot. "There is no marriage in Heaven," Sister tells us late in Act I. "It's all just

*happy*

." And I'm guessing that, in that case, Heaven is a lot like

*'Til Death Do Us Part*.

For tickets and information, call (815)244-2035 or visit [TimberLakePlayhouse.org](http://TimberLakePlayhouse.org) .