I was willing to give the Internet Players' *The Guardian* a lot of leeway, accepting playwright Kevin Straus' presentation for what it is: A morality tale of environmental responsibility. While watching Thursday's performance, I could forgive Straus his plot holes and unnatural dialogue because the author managed to discuss responsible green living with no detectable attitudes of intellectual and moral superiority. And Straus had me ... until the interpretive dance in the middle of the second act.

Directed here by Nathan Porteshawver, three-quarters' of Straus' blend of storylines – focusing on current environmental topics like chemical-free beef and the proposed Keystone Pipeline – play out in scenes that could be slices of life. There's the family of four with a teenage daughter who's set on changing the farming industry by starting a chemical-free, free-range farm. There's also a family of three, with an elementary-school-aged son who has an imaginary friend who helps him turn littered cans in the park into art. The boy's father, meanwhile, is involved in a golf game with *his* father (who is the town mayor) and a couple of oil executives (who are seeking the mayor's approval for the Keystone Pipeline). And other than the imaginary friend, there's nothing offbeat about the piece, which makes the second act's interpretive dance stick out like a sore thumb.

That's not to say that performer Martha O'Connell's technique is lacking in her performance of the dance, which itself is actually quite enjoyable. The problem is, the number enters the play out of left field, with no context for its inclusion. This routine is then followed by a bizarre puppet show that has something to do with trees being a rarity and possibly a form of currency. (I couldn't quite follow its point.) But at least *that* odd scene was set up earlier in the play, with the young boy talking about using his aluminum-can art pieces as a stage for an environmentally-themed puppet show.

It also doesn't help *The Guardian* that Porteshawver seems to have directed his actors to always face the audience; with few exceptions, the actors here continually – and unnaturally – "cheat front" to avoid having their backs to us. Personally, I was already overlooking the script's shortcomings. For example: Why are the parents of a soldier killed in Afghanistan the last to

know of his death? (Apparently the military, despite protocol, didn't inform them.) Would they not have found out about his death at all if their son's best friend hadn't decided to tell them about it? But to see such an amateurish approach to the physicality of acting incorporated, too, was almost too much, and pulled my focus from the play's content. (I kept wondering why some of the actors were walking in such a funny way, until I registered that they were merely trying to keep us from seeing their backs.) It's worth noting, though, that Gage McCalester – who plays the young boy Charles, and is probably seven or eight – *was* fully turned away from the audience at one point, yet could still be heard clearly, with his emotional intent evident, despite our not being able to see his face. If a grade-schooler can pull it off, why not the adults?

Set designer John Hayes does, at least, incorporate some interesting visuals into the production. There's a scattering of aluminum cans toward the back of the stage that's eventually collected and turned into sculptures; despite being strewn about, the cans (all featuring the same product brand and, therefore, the same colors) add some aesthetics stark black set. Charles' artwork, too, is visually interesting – pyramids and irregular towers that are eventually combined into one large wall that serves as the puppet-show stage – and his rotating set piece for the restaurant scenes is particularly clever.

Interpretive dance aside, I don't think the Internet Players' *The Guardian* is a wasted effort. There is value in Straus' "go green" message, and the author doesn't offer a definitive "this is right and this is wrong" summation. Instead, as his apparent views on environmental subjects begin to allow room for individual interpretations, he elicits thoughtful responses to his material, and I did leave the performance thinking about Straus' subject matter. While *The Guardian* isn't great, in the end it does educate and challenge perceptions, which means it serves what seems to be Straus' purpose.

The Guardian *runs at the Village Theatre (2113 E. 11th Street, Village of East Davenport) through May 20, and tickets and information are available by calling (563)940-4785 or visiting* *TheInternetPlayers.com*

.