

Written by Thom White
Monday, 20 August 2012 06:00

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The Curious Savage is the best production I've seen at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre so far this season. With its sharply funny script, interesting and endearing characters, and director Don Hazen's gentle touch rendering the piece heartfelt and sincere, I was captivated from beginning to end during Thursday's performance, curious as to how the story would unfold, and caring what would happen to the show's cast of sanatorium residents.

Author John Patrick's play is set in a mental-health facility called The Cloisters and opens in the building's living room, with the residents milling about prior to the arrival of a new patient. Taylor McKean's Fairy Mae – a fast-talking-to-a-fault, triple pigtailed, horn-rimmed-glasses-wearing compulsive liar – has self-image issues and tells tall tales of a fantastical family life, yet through McKean's sensitive but energetic portrayal, she becomes the play's most engaging character. The dashing Jordan L. Smith's Jeffrey almost constantly holds his hand to his cheek, hoping to hide the ugly scar he's left with after military service – but it's merely an *emotional* scar, one that Jeffrey believes physically exists on his face. Although his portrayal doesn't possess the range and energy of his memorable turn as Richmond Hill's

The Nerd

earlier this year, his subtlety and charm are just as notable.



Renaud Haymon's kind-natured Hannibal seems the most unassuming of the bunch and has a

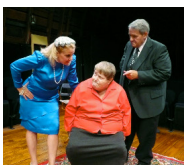
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knack for numbers and statistics – but *not* for playing the violin, despite believing that the “music” he makes on the instrument is beautiful. The mental issues of Mollie A. Schmelzer’s Florence, meanwhile, are not immediately known, as she seems a normal woman and, at first blush, could be mistaken for a Cloisters staff member, considering her motherly concern for the others. (This lack of a noticeable mental issue, even when it’s fully revealed, would be my only complaint with Schmelzer’s performance, which is otherwise impressive, and left me wondering why I’ve not been allowed the pleasure of seeing her on-stage since last year’s

Don’t Talk to the Actors.

) And then there’s Mrs. Paddy, a crotchety, scowling woman who hates everything – admitting so with long recitations of hated items – and is played with great humor by Eugenia Giebel.

The group becomes cohabitants with Ethel Savage, a wealthy woman committed to the sanatorium by her three wicked step-children – Stacy McKean Herrick’s pompous Lilly Belle, Greg Cripple’s political-power-hungry Titus, and Dave Bailey’s genteel mama’s boy Samuel – who want to get their hands on her inheritance. (They claim their stepmother’s memorial fund, set up to pay for the fulfillment of people’s fanciful dreams, is proof of her insanity.) And it is Jackie Patterson’s Ethel that is the highlight of Hazen’s production. Sporting blue hair because it “goes with everything,” Patterson’s Savage is poised but wields a hilariously biting tongue, particularly when speaking to her step-kids. What’s most interesting about Patterson’s performance, however, is her ability to walk the fine line between eccentricity and calculated disdain, making it difficult to determine if she’s crazy, or just playing that part to drive her brood of brutes crazy themselves.



As Savage plays pranks on her heartless children to prevent them from finding and stealing her fortune, she also comes to appreciate her fellow residents, offering them bits of wisdom to help them overcome their mental and emotional setbacks, and learning to appreciate their beauty as individuals. In doing so, she seems to accomplish what Dr. Emmett (portrayed by John Donald O’Shea in an atypically subtle performance) and the Cloisters’ nurse Miss Willie (earnestly played by Kayte McClanathan) cannot.

There was one significant problem with Hazen’s opening-night production. Patrick ends the play with a beautiful scene full of emotion and meaning (which I will not give away here), one requiring quick costume changes by most of the cast. Unfortunately, Thursday’s wardrobe transitions took too long to accomplish, leaving me wondering exactly what I was seeing, and having to figure out the meaning by remembering what it was I saw prior to the lights dimming for the scene change. (While the image created is still poignant, it could even be more so if

Mad Men (and Women): "The Curious Savage," at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre through August 26

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rendered more quickly.) Otherwise, Richmond Hill's *The Curious Savage* was, and is, a great success, a heartwarming comedy that I think is both laugh-worthy and lovely.

The Curious Savage runs at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre (600 Robinson Drive, Geneseo) through August 26, and information and tickets are available by calling (309)944-2244 or visiting RHPlayers.com.