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While Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart* falls into too many theatrical traps – primarily, having major actions *described* rather than physically rendered on stage – the author avoids one of the most common by making her play's second act funnier and more interesting than its first. While I liked the first act of New Ground Theatre's Saturday-evening production, I enjoyed its second half a lot more, laughing heartily with Henley's characters as they cackled over serious subject matter such as their grandfather's lapsing into a coma.

Interestingly, though, that coma isn't the core of the plot, which instead centers on the MaGrath sisters who reunite in Hazlehurst, Mississippi after the youngest sibling shoots her husband. Gathering in their ailing grandfather's home, the trio is reminded of their dysfunctional upbringing and forced to confront their long-held resentments, and director Chris Jansen treats this tragicomedy with a gentle hand; she allows *Crimes of the Heat* to play as a natural reunion of sisters who each bring their own baggage to the table, instead of shoving their individual situations and resentments in our faces. While this approach does result in blandness at times, it's much more welcome than overplaying the sisters' miseries would be – issues that include a shyness that prevents the forming of relationships, a failed singing career, and that aforementioned shooting.

As Lenny, the socially (and pathologically) inept caretaker of her grandfather, Jenny Winn shines in her awkward, limited movements, keeping her arms close to her sides as though to not attract anyone's attention. Yet her Lenny's meek kindness, and hope for something bigger

## Cray Sisters, Soul Sisters: "Crimes of the Heart," at the Village Theatre through February 10

Written by Thom White

Monday, 04 February 2013 09:00

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from life, shine through during a scene in which she makes a wish on a birthday candle, one that she tries to place on a cookie. After her face registers a bright happiness from the sheer joy of making her wish, Lenny then repeats the process, and with equally joyous results.



In contrast, Tracy Pelzer-Timm gets to be a lot louder as Meg, the singer who can't make a living of it. The actor, however, never crosses the line into overplaying the part, and maintains a welcome sincerity. Pelzer-Timm incorporates wonderful tics that can make siblings annoying – particularly her habit of taking the first sip of a drink she's bringing to someone *else* – and sports a sweet, girlish grin whenever the name of neighbor Doc is mentioned. (Dana Moss-Peterson plays this married man whom Meg flirts with and, especially for this actor, gives a relatively subdued performance.)

Kylie Jansen appears at the height of her craft when the husband-shooting sister Babe talks with her endearingly awkward lawyer Barnette (Alec Peterson), and recounts the time they first met. During their discussion, Babe pauses when searching her memory for the specifics of the event, which become gradually more evident when an excited smile forms on her lips. While this may seem like an insignificant moment, it's actually a beautiful one that testifies to Kylie Jansen's talent for genuineness in her portrayals.

Jen Sondgeroth leans toward caricature as the sisters' cousin Chick, the sisters' cousin, though the caricature is fitting, given that Chick's hoity-toity attitude is, in itself, insincere. Although Chick is disliked by the sisters, Sondgeroth's putting-on-airs routine is so much fun to watch that I relished her every scene, and she's also dressed in a wonderfully appropriate ensemble, wearing a busy-patterned, predominantly red skirt, yellow top, and red necklace that's disproportionately large and chunky for the outfit but *does* match her red heels and purse. (The show's program doesn't list a costume designer, but whoever it is made similarly smart choices for all of the characters.)

In her dual role as production designer, Chris Jansen also sets the presentation's tone by setting the entire play in a simple, light-green kitchen space with basic, older appliances, a small table, and chairs – though there's also a bed to the side. I found the simplicity of this scenery noteworthy even prior to the start of Saturday's performance, and it's this sort of unaffected simplicity that makes New Ground Theatre's *Crimes of the Heart* special.

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*Crimes of the Heart runs at the Village Theatre (2113 East 11th Street, Village of East Davenport) through February 10, and information and tickets are available by calling (563)326-7529 or visiting [NewGroundTheatre.org](http://NewGroundTheatre.org).*