Written by Thom White
Monday, 11 March 2013 06:00

Playwright Lee Blessing's *A Walk in the Woods* successfully re-creates a sense of the Reagan-era Cold War conflict between the United States and the then-Soviet Union ... at least according to an older friend of mine who also attended Friday's performance of New Ground Theatre's production. However, my theatre-going companion also agreed with me that the play is reminiscent of the film *My Dinner with Andre*, famed for simply being a conversation between two people in one setting. And Blessing's story is just that – a series of discussions between a U.S. and Russian diplomat sitting, or sometimes standing near, a park bench. For two hours.

Directed here by Chris Jansen, the play takes place over the course of a year as the two men negotiate an arms-limitations agreement between their countries, often taking walks in the woods near Geneva, Switzerland, and stopping at a park bench to sit and talk. Those are the points at which we, the audience, join them for one day in each of the year's four seasons. Blessing's brilliant dialogue explores how the men work to come up with a mutually agreeable arms-reduction proposal, get their countries' leaders to also agree to it, and then re-work the agreement when one side refuses to accept it, and these discussions – and the international political relationships depicted in them – are fascinating to listen to, even though the play is far from fascinating to watch.

Production designer Patty Koenigsaecker and technical director Gil Koenigsaecker make a valiant effort at adding interest to the proceedings by way of four vertical, white, narrow rectangles standing along the back of the stage onto which images are projected. For the summer and fall seasons, the tops of trees, shown as if viewed from below, wash over the rectangles, with a bright, blue, cloud-filled sky employed for winter and spring. The images, and the broken nature of the screen onto which they're projected, are beautiful.

As the Russian diplomat Andrey Botvinnik, John VanDeWoestyne once again shines for the seemingly casual nature of his craft, acting as if there's little effort to his acting at all, and creating a sincere character that doesn't seem at all forced. While his Russian accent slips here and there (and sometimes sounds a bit Transylvanian), it's the only inconsistency in his otherwise remarkable performance, with his Botvinnik a genial, easygoing fellow whose rare outbursts of frustrated anger, though quite big, still don't seem out of place; his friendly veneer is just unable to hold back his true feelings.

Matt Moody, on the other hand, is a good actor who could be great if he could break what seems to be a barrier between his realistic depiction and his contrived actions. Moody manages to shape his John Honeyman with shades of emotion, but every moment feels planned, and executed according to that plan. In his first few moments on stage, Moody points off-stage as John refers to reporters trailing the two diplomats. He then holds his extended arm and finger in place while listening to VanDeWoestyne deliver his next line, as if frozen in the final physical moment from Moody's previous line, and unable to move until he starts to deliver his next sentence. It's unnatural, as is his later attempt to find a pen requested by Andrey; instead of a sincere search for a writing utensil that may or may not be in his coat pocket, Moody's gestures scream "place right hand on right pocket, place left hand on left pocket, place right hand on breast pocket, look surprised to find a pen." On Friday, it felt as if Moody refused to release emotional control to allow his lines and actions to influence his feelings, rather than feigning emotions simply because they match his words. Let me be clear, though: Moody's obvious acting doesn't *ruin* his performance. It's simply a barrier between his being a good actor – which he is – and being a great one, and John Honeyman is still a nuanced, fully-realized character who is interesting for the dynamic emotion (if affected emotion) Moody brings to the role.

Unfortunately, Jansen and her cast are limited by the lack of action in Blessing's *A Walk in the Woods*, which might be more aptly titled *A Sit in the Woods* or *A Coupla White Negotiators Sitting Around Talking*. Blessing's script is well written, with a clear sense of Russian/American relations and the frustrations that diplomats have with what can seem like fruitless work. However, the lack of any movement beyond the actors walking to the bench, or getting up and down from it, had me thinking the play would work almost as well on audiotape as it does on New Ground Theatre's – or any theatre's – stage.

A Walk in the Woods *runs at the Village Theatre (2113 East 11th Street, Davenport) through March 17, and more information and tickets are available by calling (563)326-7529 or visiting NewGroundTheatre.org*
.