

Written by Thom White
Monday, 13 May 2013 06:00

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The trouble with the Playcrafters Barn Theatre's *The Trouble with Cats* is that Patti Flaherty is not featured enough during its two-and-a-half-hour length. Playing a dry, crass, flirtatious lowbrow named Joy Bombay, Flaherty proves it's possible to present bad material in a way that's enjoyable to watch, and when I laughed during Friday's performance, it was usually due to Flaherty's comedically nuanced deliveries or comically condescending or cruel facial expressions and body language. The actor is clearly gifted when it comes to comedy.

Unfortunately, she's working with playwright Gary Ray Stapp's poor dialogue and convoluted characters, and a plot that may be clear but possesses none of the poignancy Stapp seems to be aiming for. Playcrafters director Megan Elliott demonstrates her talent by shaping a production that's sincere, friendly, and evenly paced. However, Friday's *The Trouble with Cats* needed more urgency through greater speed and depths of emotion in several scenes, especially during the chaos that is meant to ensue when the vegan, yoga-practicing Sunshine (Liz Paxton) and the chocolate-loving hippie River (Matt Moody) encroach upon the house-sitting gig of the mild-mannered Ivy and Phillip (Rae Mary and Patrick Gimm). That is, after all, the thrust of the plot, and what is supposed to be the catalyst for the play's humor – that two wildly different married couples are booked for the same house-sitting job.



A Full House, with Jokers: "The Trouble with Cats," at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre through May 19

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There's also a plot point that inspires *The Trouble with Cats'* title, which involves the homeowners' teen son, whom the housesitters never see and – as they were given a feeding schedule for him – think is a cat. This allows for some farcical elements in the play, including a scene in which Ivy, Phillip, and the teen PJ (Alex Richardson, alternating performances with Joey Pautsch) go in and out of bedroom and bathroom doors without seeing each other. Ivy also sets out bowls of cat food, which PJ eats thinking it's tuna salad – an act that elicited disgusted groans that gave way to laughs in Friday's audience. But otherwise, there's no "trouble" caused by the play's unseen cat, and whether or not the house-sitters eventually learn the truth hardly seems to matter.

It would be enough for the script to play up the wackiness of Sunshine's and River's granola nature versus Ivy's and Phillip's prudish nature. Instead, though, Stapp slaps on three more storylines involving three sisters who are renovating the master bedroom: Holly Jo Alford's bossy, stunted Mitzy, Molly Wilkison's sexless, somewhat overplayed Noelle, and Sarah Smith's endearingly weird Onie. These characters are unnecessary – the same humor would result if Stapp made them all *one* character – and add to the feeling that there's just too much going on here. It's hard to care about anyone in the show because there's too much chaos in the plot, and little of it contributes to your enjoyment. And if all that weren't enough, Stapp also slaps on "lessons learned" and "emotional connections accomplished" over the course of the play – none of which was actually driven home over the course of the play.



That being said, there are a few laughs in Playcrafters' production – among them almost every line and look Patti Flaherty delivers. But costume designer Paxton also deserves praise for having Flaherty dressed in curlers, horn-rimmed glasses, and mismatched prints for her casual look, and a leopard-print dress, scarf, and handbag – all of which seem to clash despite being the same print – for her formalwear. And Stapp himself even hits the comedy nail on the head at times; when Ivy makes fish for dinner and Sunshine points out that it doesn't fit her vegan diet, Ivy says, "I thought maybe fish would be okay. Catholics don't mind it."

Still, the play's two-and-a-half-hour running time isn't justified, as Stapp's writing doesn't really demand that length of time (and *The Trouble with Cats* might actually be improved by being shortened through edits). Playcrafters Barn Theatre's production, meanwhile, would also benefit from faster pacing, which would not only minimize the play's length, but give this script some much-needed oomph.

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The Trouble with Cats runs at the Playcrafters Barn Theatre (4950 35th Avenue, Moline) through May 19, and more information and tickets are available by calling (309)762-0330 or visiting Playcrafters.com.