

Riverside Theatre's "Wit" Triumphs over Cancer

Written by Joy Thompson

Tuesday, 06 February 2001 18:00

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Riverside Theatre in Iowa City continues its 20th anniversary season with another outstanding Pulitzer Prize-winning drama produced rarely outside urban centers. "Big drama in small places" accurately describes *Wit*, written by first-time playwright Margaret Edson and originally produced at the Long Wharf Theatre in New Haven, Connecticut, one of the nation's leading producers of contemporary drama.

A running time of two hours without intermission gives the audience no break from the taut, direct gaze of Dr. Vivian Bearing, university lecturer, Donne scholar, and stage-four ovarian-cancer patient. The audience is treated as Dr. Vivian's classroom of undergraduate students, an apt metaphor since she seems to have no real friends, only colleagues. The drama unfolds almost entirely in the cancer ward of the University Hospital Comprehensive Cancer Ward.

Eight other actors play a variety of characters who interact with Dr. Bearing through a series of flashbacks to her childhood and to her days as a student of Donne. But the play is dominated by Dr. Bearing, portrayed in this production by Jody Hovland, co-founder and co-artistic director of Riverside. Her mini-lectures about Donne's metaphysical poetry are juxtaposed with the harsher realities of modern cancer treatment.

She slowly realizes that her own unfeeling and disdainful attitude toward undergraduates is fully matched by the antiseptic, objective medical clinician's treatment of cancer victims. Her conversations with one of her primary physicians, a research fellow, reveal all of the flaws in both systems, medical and educational.

And yet it is the humor that makes this play so compelling.

Donne's sonnets and the "wit," or irony, contained within them illuminate this woman's battle against ovarian cancer and the toll extreme chemotherapy takes on the patient it hopes to cure ... and sometimes ends up killing instead. By the end of the play, Dr. Bearing just longs for a simple word of kindness and the human touch of her favorite nurse.

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The inevitable conclusion left the entire audience silent for a full minute, a tribute to the heroic struggle played dramatically and humorously by Hovland and an excellent supporting cast. This is a play for the strong of heart who seek meaningful contemporary drama that informs, illuminates, and educates, not just entertains.

As a production, *Wit* succeeds on all levels. See it.

Performances of Wit are scheduled for February 8 (7 p.m.), 9 (8 p.m.), 10 (8 p.m.), and 11 (2 p.m.) at Riverside Theatre in Iowa City. For tickets or more information, call (319)338-7672.