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THE MONITOR

DETROIT, MI

W-CIRC 21,000

NOV 22 2006



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THEATRE REVIEW

Bazaar, Bewildering 'Joke'

From the opening scene of "Polish Joke," the current production of the University of Detroit Mercy's Theatre Company, it's obvious that here's a play that's just smarting to ruffle a few feathers.

Roman, a middle-aged man of Polish descent, sits sluggishly in a lawn chair on the porch of the neat little bungalow he calls home. He is swilling a beer the prescribed Polish way, with egg and salt, while nearby his brother Wojtek interrupts his snoring only to burp or to reach down and scratch his big, hairy belly.

Roman is instructing Jasiu (say Yah-shoe), his nephew and godson, on the curses of having been born Polish. "All of those Polish jokes are true, ya know," he says, and as proof goes on to offer a laundry list of things that have happened to relatives and neighbors, all fellow Poles, that speak to the veracity of the Polish joke.

The truth of what is contained in those jokes, Roman maintains, is that Polish people are stupid, slovenly inebriates whose only fit in life is to work at dirty, laborious jobs. They eat food that's one step up from garbage (e.g. duck's blood soup and tripe) and are connoisseurs of some of life's more base pleasures, like sleeveless undershirts. Moreover, Poles are somehow born with a deep, dark cloud of despair and disappointment hanging over them, a cloud from which they can never escape.

Roman's words inspire Jasiu to forsake his Polish heritage. He goes out into the world, first as a man without a country, finally assuming the identity of an Irishman because the Irish seem to have good standing among the nationalities of the world.

What follows are a series of adventures in which Jasiu's Polishness is called into question: an encounter with a human resources employee at a job interview where he is tricked into admitting his nationality; a bizarre meeting with a family of Poles who have tunneled their way across from Poland to America; and an engagement with a group of bogus Irish folk at an airline ticket counter where Jasiu plans to buy a one-way ticket to Ireland to begin life anew.

Along the way, he encounters endless Polish jokes and loads of discrimination. His journey ends back where it began, on a lawn chair on the porch of Roman's little bungalow, a mug of beer bolstered by an egg and some salt in his hand.

In other venues where the play has been produced, it has garnered protests and much criticism from Polish-Americans. It should be noted that the play's author is David Ives, real name, David Roszkowski, a Pole nurtured in a Polish-Catholic enclave on the South side of Chicago. Obviously, Ives has an axe to grind with his own Polish heritage.

In an attempt to make the play palatable, Ives throws in a few accomplishments of the Polish people and a geography lesson that helps explain the constant intrusion of neighboring countries onto Polish lands. Also, The Theatre Company's production is bookended with a pair of Polish dancers gaily bedecked in traditional costume who take a few turns around the stage in a native dance.

It's as if to say that there's really a culture that these Poles have, one that can be beautiful and meaningful and artistic. And, to be fair, Ives spreads around the stereotyping, doing hatchet jobs on Jews, the Irish, WASPs, and even Latvians, all in the name of comedy.

So is the play offensive? A time clock would record a robust two hours of the show as presenting a derogatory look at the Polish people. Weigh that against a 15 or 20 minute span where the author has good things to say about his target. Which do you think could do more damage: a bowling ball or a feather?

Even the ending seems gratuitous. Don't take it too badly, the author seems to be saying. It was all just a joke, a big, fat Polish joke.

Is the show funny? Try this.

Question: "How many Polacks does it take to screw in a light bulb? Polack: "What's a light bulb?"

If you find this funny, this show could be just what you've been looking for.

Is the play good theatre? This is the author's first full length play. His previous successes have been at one acts and sketch comedy.

"Polish Joke" is a hodge-podge and mish-mash of styles and focus laced together under the banner of Jasiu's quest for identity. One wonders how this show ever got out of workshop. Want poignant and realistic? It's here. Want nutty and the absurd? Got it. Want a show that's repetitive and divergent? It's here, too.

Eclecticism at the hands of a skilled writer can be a rewarding experience. Ives has not yet reached that degree of accomplishment. At show's end, the only thing left for the theatergoer to do is to throw up his or her hands in bewilderment.

"Polish Joke" is directed by Yolanda Fleischer. In a show where eight cast members play a score of character parts, Greg Trazaskoma turns in polished performances as Roman and several others. David Kowalczyk performs admirably as Jasiu.

"Polish Joke" continues in production through December 3. The Theatre Company performs at the Marygrove Theatre on the campus of Marygrove College, 8425 W. McNichols in northwest Detroit. For tickets, call (313) 993-3270.

