



Posted on Thu, May. 10, 2012

World-premiere comedy at the Heartland goes for laughs any way it can

By ROBERT TRUSSELL
The Kansas City Star

The American Heartland Theatre's world-premiere production of Sean Grennan's "As Long As We Both Shall Live" racks up its share of pluses and minuses — although the Wednesday night audience seemed to find plenty of humor in the piece.

This murder-mystery comedy is a calculatedly silly romp, relying on repetition, visual gags and cheap local references to get laughs — which, I have to admit, it does. Grennan gets some of the credit, but the talented actors take the material and run with it.

Grennan is a witty guy who isn't afraid to take chances, but often he gets bogged down in plot details. Director William J. Christie wisely keeps things moving along at a reasonable pace with an eye on the running time.

Jessalyn Kincaid plays Addison Ashe, a beautiful young woman with a genius I.Q. She's more knowledgeable about arcane details than Sherlock Holmes, a talent that ultimately saves her neck.

The opening scene depicts her first meeting with millionaire Jamie Wilcox (Jeff Smith) when she pulls over to the roadside to help get his stalled car started — which she does with the flick of her wrist.

Soon they plan to be married, but they face a huge obstacle in the form of Jamie's mother, the overbearing Mrs. Wilcox (Melinda MacDonald). And then there's the matter of the prenuptial agreement and a huge life insurance policy. Also in the mix is a loopy pastor, Rev. Mountain (Doogin Brown), as well as an extravagantly effeminate wedding planner named Raul Montelban (Charles Fugate).

On the day of the wedding rehearsal, one of these characters drops dead and much of the second act is dedicated to unraveling clues to ultimately reveal who did it and why. Grennan throws in a few red herrings to keep us guessing.

This is not quite a true farce, but it does generate a fair amount of manic energy. And it's constructed in a way that allows for some vivid theatrical moments. Addison often steps out of the action with a snap of her fingers to address the audience, and the action unfolds on a non-realistic but physically sumptuous set designed by Michael G. Benson. The lighting design by Shane Rowse and the sound by Donna Miller-Brown work in concert to introduce characters with a sort of visual shorthand.

In short, there's a lot of creativity on onstage. The show ultimately threatens to wear out its welcome because most viewers will be far less interested in the intricacies of the mystery than enjoying the over-the-top humor, which slows down considerably before the final blackout.

The gifted Kincaid doesn't really have much of a character, so she compensates by amping up the charisma and her considerable charm. Towards the end of the show she gets to do some real acting, and shows, as usual, that she's very good. MacDonald is in rare form, delivering an exceptional comedic performance as Mrs. Wilcox, whose vitriolic cattiness is matched by her wild mood swings. Brown has some fun with Rev. Mountain, who's desperately afraid of the dark (the lights go off frequently because the Wilcox patriarch invented "clapper" sound-activated lighting). Smith is the straight man of the show and performs his duties unobtrusively.

Fugate plays multiple roles, including Raul's equally flamboyant brother and a not-so-bright police detective. One of the unexpected pleasures of this show is a sequence in Act. 1 in which Raul and Addison trade insults in

Spanish; we understand most of it and Rev. Mountain helpfully translates at key moments. Fugate and Kincaid put on a comic-timing workshop.

I can't wrap up this review without mentioning Paul Hough's costumes. Hough outdoes himself in the outfits he creates for Kincaid. Her wedding "gown" is actually a cape over a white mini-dress with a white feathered head piece. All of her clothes seem to be designed with one goal in mind – make Kincaid look sexy as possible. He certainly succeeds.

To reach Robert Trussell, theater critic, call 816-234-4765 or send email to rtrussell@kcstar.com.

© 2012 Kansas City Star and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.kansascity.com>