The Alchemist: plausible

By Peter coffee

The perfectly plausible story is the acid test of theatre. Ben Jonson’s “The Alchemist” is a story of realistic characters in a setting independent of time and place, which makes the MIT Dramashop’s recent production noteworthy as achievement.

The same, balanced person, acting only from normal motives, would grow, somebody and would be no my character to convincing-ly play. Audiences “know” how people “really” behave, and unnaturalness in the role of an everyday citizen will be punctuated upon when the same flaw in a portrayal of the real Dane might be accepted as a matter of inter-pretation. The closer a story comes to its audience’s daily life, the greater becomes the impor-tance of smooth, well-paced dia-logue and clarity of motivation.

“The Alchemist’s” straight-forward plot leaves the audience free to observe and enjoy the characters as complete personali-ties, without the frantic struggle to “keep score” of who’s done what to whom and why that characterizes performances of, say, “Richard III.” The Drama-shop cast displayed considerable ability, not just as actors, but as reactors, playing against each other with high style in a story that challenges “The Sting” for suspense, surprise and distilled essence of comedy.

Emil Millet held a pivotal role, both as an actor and in his character of the builder Jeremy, masquerading as Captain Face, draws the gullible into his absent master’s house, there to be foiled by the snarte-oil sales-man Subtle (Jeffrey Schwartz ’72) and the bawdy bait Dol Common (played by Artist in Residence, Joan Tolentino).

Millet’s character spent three hours moving in all directions at once, crossing his employer, his victims and, finally, his partners in a series of schemes of unsur-passed elopishness. The difficulty of the part was, unfortunately, made clear beyond question by visible groping for words at several points in each of the two performances attended, but with few exceptions Millet’s appearance was characterized by a commanding presence and substance.

Schwartz and Tolentino were likewise required to play both “real” and fraudulent characters with frequent changes, and were surprisingly successful. The crooked triumvirate ruled the Little Theatre with the strength born of confidence, creating a tangible tension in the audience that tightened with every hitch in plans, only to be released in laughter as the trio survived successive crises.

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