Chamberlain directs The Shadow Box

The Shadow Box, a two-act play by Michael Cristofer, starring Frank Converse, Betsy Palmer, directed by Richard Chamberlain, now playing at the Charles Playhouse.

By Joel West

The plaudits for The Shadow Box are numerous, a Tony and a Pulitzer Prize among them. And yet, taken together, while the current production and the play itself are very good, they are only near-prize.

To play attempts to tackle a weighty and important concept, the role of hope in people's lives, and how it is affected by the imminent specter of death. The action takes place in a resort in the mountains of California, where three individuals wait to die. The three, and their respective loved ones, are oblivious to each other and interact separately throughout most of the play.

Each of the three "families" is introduced when the respective terminal patient comes onstage and carries on a dialogue with an unseen interviewer (James Oyster). Joe (David Sabini) is the first, a-tiring New Jersky who could be from Death of a Salesman's Willy Loman transplanted into the 1970's. His wife Maggie (Karen Shulte) is dutifully supporting, while his only child Steve (Rob DeRosa) is at the "geez-whiz" stage of his life.

In the second group, Brian is the 50ish intellectual played by Frank Converse, with Betsy Palmer as his ex-wife Beverly, a fan-loving dancer, and Tony Blake as Brian's handsome young lover Mark. The third family is an aging but spunky grandmother figure Felicity (Elizabeth Fleming) who is attended to by her unloved daughter Agnes (Alexandra Borrie). And therein lies the problem. It is bad enough that Cristofer chose his characters from literary cardboard; but most of them seem to have come pre-printed, with only a slight coloring here and there to add any semblance of originality.

The character of Brian holds the most promise. Intelligent, sensitive, and yet incomprehensible to himself and those around him, he is the only character who is not aptly summed up in two sentences. Converse's interpretation at times is brilliant, as real as if he himself were going to die in 6 months. At other times, however, he is reduced to a confused presentation of a confused character. That the character should pose problems to such an obviously talented actor is in a way entertaining to the writer's ability, but one would hope these problems are that the actor can't iron out during the play's six-week run.

Betsy Palmer steals the show. Someone who has enjoyed life to its fullest, toughened by her education in the college of hard-knocks, she nonetheless very much cares about what has happened to the man whose life she once shared. When onstage, Palmer totally dominates Blake and is clearly in control in her scenes with Converse.

The only other individual that does an exceptional job with a complex character is Alexandra Borrie. Constantly being compared to her mother's favorite daughter Claire, Agnes is nonetheless the one who ministers to her mother's needs during Felicity's interminable path to the grave. Though she has some good scenes in the first act, Borrie's big moment comes in Act II, when she realizes she is trapped in a situation of her own making.

By comparison, the other characters and actors warrant only cursory attention: while only the performance of Tony Blake has serious flaws, the lesser characters are severely lacking in depth. Rob DeRosa is at first-rate, however, as he repeats his Broadway role of the guitar-playing adolescent, his singing and playing are perfect, both in setting the mood and in keeping with the nature of his role.

Let there be no mistake made: while most of the characters are shallow and the finale is disappointingly stiff and cliched, The Shadow Box is undeniably good theatre. In tackling such a difficult subject, Cristofer and Chamberlain have chosen the standards by which they wish to be judged, standards by which they fall short. This does not stop The Shadow Box from being one of the best (if not the best) dramas to hit Boston this season.