Dramashop's New Baby

Dramashop mounted an admirable production of Pulitzer prize winning play, Buried Child. The piece, one of Sam Shepard's newer works, is an account of the return of a grandson to his grandparent's home. There, he finds no one knows him or cares who he is. The central part of the story, however, is his family's revelation of a family secret to his traveling companion. True to Shepard's style, the stage is a "picture window"; the audience observes passively. Visiting director David Wheeler seemed to minimize this effect by using the apron extensively, having the actors speak their monologues or dialogues to the side and more or less to the audience, and using Self-Accusation as a kind of frame to his ends.

Critics John Lahr points out that Shepard's characters "... are often plagued by inconcreteness, leaving the actors with ideas to play rather than characters." Given this built-in difficulty, the actors did a remarkable job. All the characters were believable except, perhaps, the preacher (Emil Millet). He seemed to develop roots immediately upon entering. His lines were well-rehearsed and delivered on cue, but lacked dynamic backing. Edythe Frampton as Halie was credible, if a bit histrionic, and might have used a bit more subtlety in her expressions. There is no question, however, that Steve Solnick was made for the part of Tilden as he turned in a command performance as the moron. Bill Bryan, Steve Thornquist, and Dave Waggett (Bradley, Vince, and Dodge, respectively) all performed exquisitely as well, though Dave Waggett's own personality occasionally overshadowed his well-conceived characterization. Sue Botti exhibited her talents well as the carefree Shelly. She needs a bit more experience, though, to make all Shelly's lines her own.

The first production of the evening, Self-Accusation, by Austrian-born Peter Handke, is a theatrical exercise in biography. Called speak-ins (Sprechstucke), Self-Accusation and about four other pieces were a new form of theatre meant to make people aware of the limits of language imagery. Contradicting development, Handke states: "The speak-ins have no action, since every action on stage would only be the picture of another action." The action in this case did detract from the speaking. If one disregards this unfalsified to Handke's intentions, however, the production becomes a mesmerizing experience, a sort of chant of meaningless words coming from all sides, accompanied by a modern dance which ranged all around the theatre. It effectively engulfs the audience and forces participation in the goings-on of the stage. Perhaps this is the mood Wheeler wanted to precede the Shepard play. One wonders whether another piece might have been just as effective without demanding so many deviations from the author's intended purpose. The actors were a plausible ensemble that worked well together and the choreography was inventive. Of the piece by itself, apart from its use as prelude to Buried Child, I can only quote Handke: "I suppose there's something to be said for not doing something else."

The production runs Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, May 7, 8, and 9 at eight o'clock in the Kresge Little Theatre. Tickets are $3.50 ($3.00 for students).

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