

Salowitz and Gibbs simply ‘Brilliant’

Theatre review by John Busbee – April 15, 2005

The challenge in establishing a theatre’s unique identity is complex. The Vaudeville Mews’ current offering, “Brilliant Traces,” helps clarify its special place for central Iowa theatre-goers. Increasingly delivering powerful, energetic and/or comedic shows, the Mews has expanded the quantity of stage offerings from its early days, and now is consistently matching the early quality. Blending strong scripts, top-notch talent and the intimate confines of the Mews produce a markedly metropolitan evening of theatre for central Iowans looking for stage presentations with substance.

Cindy Lou Johnson’s ninety-minute, no-intermission play takes a standard plot –two characters in an outlandish situation, watch the personality tennis match ensue – and gives it some great sizzle. First produced in 1989 by New York City’s Circle Repertory Company, “Brilliant Traces” is set in a remote cabin in the wilds of Alaska, in the midst of a fierce blizzard, with self-exiled Henry Harry (Richie Gibbs) trying to sleep under bundles of blankets. Bursting through the door, out of the storm and invading his life, is the wedding-gowned, satin-slipped Rosannah DeLuce (Shoshana Salowitz). The ensuing interplay continually strips away layers of defenses surrounding each character, gradually revealing wide ranges of weaknesses, motivations and fears.

Salowitz grabs the audience from her initial, priceless monologue as she teeters on the edge of exhausted delirium. This opening speech ends with her fainting, Harry places her in his bed, and he stands watch as her two-day slumber is interrupted only once, as she sits up and claims, “I’m the prettiest girl you’ve ever seen.” Salowitz magnificently portrays DeLuce’s alternating vulnerabilities and defiances as she copes with the final destination her dazed journey (“gas, pee, Coke and a Mars Bar every four hours”) from Arizona to Alaska created.

Salowitz virtually dances through the play, and uses her entire, expressive body in the portrayal of DeLuce, evoking nuances from her character that transcend mere line delivery. She wraps her DeLuce in a cloak of border-line insanity and leaves the audience with glimpses of wispy, then steel-strong, character traits.

Gibbs’ Harry provides a marvelous balance to Salowitz’s DeLuce. Two-person plays rely on strong chemistry, and these two deliver a catalytic dose. Gibbs masterfully sets his character on a gradually evolving course, slowly revealing the flaws and deep-seated wounds that forced his isolated existence. Affable, yet with seething issues just beneath the surface, he is unwillingly thrown into this human interaction. At one of many revealing points, he exclaims, “Before you came, all I wanted to be was a gray man,” a choice DeLuce’s intrusion has all but erased.

A few technical glitches can easily be fixed. First, the blizzard soundtrack was spotty, and inconsistently used. Also, the special lighting downstage left, where much important dialogue is delivered, could use stronger lighting to heighten each actor’s expressive deliveries.

These minor flaws are easily overlooked, as Salowitz and Gibbs deliver vivid exchanges that push the unraveling and reconfiguring of each character along. As more is revealed to each other, humor, compassion, conflict and ghosts from the past are shared in this unexpected, perhaps not-so-divine, intervention of two troubled souls. Their monologues and exchanges are wonderfully engaging, sometimes entertaining, sometimes crackling with intensity.

This show represents the hallmark of Mews programming: strong theatrical fare at great prices. Hopefully, more patrons will find their way to the Mews for this delectable piece of stagework.