

Wit and welcome hilarity romp throughout ‘Laughter’

Theatre review by John Busbee

Theater...for a change continues to grow, drawing for its second offering this season from the comedic brilliance of Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright, Neil Simon. TFAC’s “Laughter on the 23rd Floor” delivers a visual and well-acted laugh-fest.

Under the masterful guidance of veteran director/actor Michael Cornelison, the eclectic ensemble is pushed to keep the action moving. The challenge is choreographing a stage full of actors into a delightful interplay of organized chaos, and Cornelison deftly meets the challenge. His casting must surely have mirrored the diverse team of writers Simon experienced in this reflection of his early writing for Sid Caesar’s ‘Your Show of Shows.’ Additional kudos are earned by Lighting and Scenic Designer, Sean Kearney, for creating a wonderfully engaging setting for the Viking Theatre space, establishing the effect of being in an elevated television studio.

“Laughter on the 23rd Floor” draws us into the early career of Simon through his alter ego, Lucas. As junior jokesmith in a loony bin full of seasoned writers led by the inimitable Max Prince (the Sid Caesar character), Lucas serves as narrator/guide through the harsh reality of cut-backs in the vicious business of making people laugh. Personal foibles become vulnerabilities, and the rich, pressurized subtext underlying the business of creating jokes ebbs and flows with the threat of bursting their tenuous existence. However, this is Neil Simon at his best, as he overrides the human drama with incredible humor, and this ensemble understands and delivers, weaving the comical landscape with occasional moments of poignancy.

As Lucas, Ben Eichner gives his character nice growth, from the somewhat retreating newbie to a more seasoned part of the madhouse. Milt (played with bombastic rotundity by Dave Williams), Val (delightfully laced with mispronounced vulgarities by Michael DeNato), Brian (with Tim Rose calmly lobbing shots back), Kenny (robustly portrayed by Steve Hickle, dragging his personal life behind him like a loose tail), Ira (played with acerbic wit by Joseph E. Smith), and Carol (delivered with gender-equity craving delightful and believable character by Amy E. Williams) form the core of the comedy writing team. Add the delightful Helen, the assistant yearning to join the writing ranks, played with wide-eyed delight by Megan Moore, and the pivotal Max Prince (delivered in zany, robust fashion by Dan Chase), and the formula for an onslaught of laughter is richly complete. Chase becomes the lightning rod for much of the action, delivering many memorable moments throughout the show.

This ensemble exudes a nice chemistry in their stage work, making much of their volleying back and forth in a banquet of delicious, Simone-esque offerings. The few botched lines and infrequent slow pacing are easily forgiven, as all embraced the essence of Simon’s brilliantly crafted dialogue, making it their own. This production delivers a delectable evening of entertainment from one of America’s great playwrights, unfortunately not produced as often as his plays should be.

Be sure to catch one of these performances at the Viking Theatre at Grand View College before the show closes December 17. The laughs and enjoyment of live theatre are well worth the \$10 admission price.