

The A-B-Cs of Albee adroitly presented

Theatre review by John Busbee for The Culture Buzz

Theater...for a change opens its 2007-2008 season with a work seldom produced in Iowa, giving patrons a wonderful opportunity to breathe in the heady dialogue of Edward Albee in his autobiographically slanted, *Three Tall Women*. This Pulitzer prize-winning play vaulted Albee back to the top of the theatre scene in 1994 after a long creative drought following his previous Pulitzer efforts in 1967 (*A Delicate Balance*) and 1975 (*Seascape*). This show also garnered the Drama Critics Circle, Lucille Lortel, and Outer Critics Circle awards for best play. His portrayal of aging and human frailty avoids the usual sentimentality, delivering a substantive theatrical experience with wit and insight. TFAC expands its portfolio with *Three Tall Women*, transforming the Viking Theatre with its lavish set, and transporting the audience into Albee's psyche.

TFAC's *Three Tall Women*, directed by producing artistic director Thatcher Williams, is capably handled by a trio of gifted actresses. Edward Albee's dialogue demands intricate and tight ensemble work, and this show delivers, especially for the drama connoisseur. Albee simply designates his characters as A, B and C. In this production, Sue Gerver, Mary Bricker and Laura Van Waardhuizen portray A, B and C, respectively. The first act finds Gerver (A) as a nonagenarian (is she 91 or 92?), vacillating between senile uncertainty and poignant reflections. While A shows definite vulnerabilities, she often flares with a fire reflective of a long life of dictating her own destiny. Gerver's doddering portrayal has sledgehammer force. It's familiar to anyone coping with or witnessing the infirmities that time ruthlessly delivers.

As the middle-aged caretaker, Bricker projects a seemingly inexhaustible patience as she softens realities for A while fending off the brash, often insensitive, comments of Van Waardhuizen. In Act I, B's actions and words hint at deep pools underlying a calm surface, hiding steely opinions and acerbic commentary (that manifest in Act II). Bricker nicely cloaks her character with a caretaker's persona, yet an underlying no-nonsense resolve. As C, Van Waardhuizen displays all the intolerance and impatience of youth. Her character flirts with a touch of petulance that should be avoided to give C the bite that role deserves.

Following A's stroke at the end of Act I, the powerful juxtaposition of these three characters fully develops in Act II. All three share the point of view, volleying back and forth as the play continues its surreal momentum to a conclusion as inevitable as death. Albee's use of A, B and C in their interpersonal conflicts and perspectives provides an innovative point of view to explore issues of life, death and indulgence. This device fills the stage with rich drama, which this cast deftly exploits. A silent fourth character, the grieving son at his stricken mother's bedside, adds textural impact. If there is a fault with this production, it lies in the pacing, which could have been prodded to give more desperation, urgency and drive to the play's action. That being said, *Three Tall Women* remains an excellent gem in TFAC's continuing role as a producer of profound, entertaining and engaging theatre for Central Iowa.

Three Tall Women is an alluring evening of theatre, especially at the "everyman" ticket prices that have become the hallmark of TFAC. In addition to his adept directing, Williams also created the masterful scenic design, giving this theatre space a delightfully different look and feel. Completing the production team are Sean Kearney (lighting design), David Oddy (assistant director/stage manager), Christy Wilkins (costume designer), and Jeff Smith (tech operator). *Three Tall Women* runs through September 23.