

Witty Dead Guy doesn't flatline

Exclusive review by John Busbee, The Culture Buzz

With a rather bizarre seasonal offering, trend-setting Theater...for a change (TFAC) delivers the dark comedy, "The Dead Guy," with flair. Just as one must step away from the relentless parade of holiday sweets for a bit more substance, so should one step away from the 45th airing of "A Christmas Carol" and feast on this wonderful diversion. This salty satire fills the bill.

Playwright Eric Coble crafts a response to the relentless assault on our senses by a myriad of reality TV shows. Coble's story devises the ultimate reality show: give some down-and-out guy a million bucks to spend in a week, videotaping his activities, before he is killed on the final show, his demise chosen by an online vote. The allure to this morbid theme catapults the show to top ratings...with many unexpected turns in the journey.

Director Ann Wilkinson taps the strengths of her talented cast as she unfolds this absurd tale to its surprise conclusion. Wilkinson deftly instills some delightful physicality in her scene work as she keeps the action moving. The colorful and functional set features multi-level staging and an upstage wall replete with colorful square panels that reveal elements for various scenes, plus a clever sliding door access to facilitate scene changes.

The absurdity of the situation is veiled by the day to day documentation of Eldon Phelps (the dead guy) as his newfound wealth coupled with his seven day quest to establish his legacy collides with the people in his life. Eldon (played with conflicted skill by Mike Tweeten) begins as the foul-mouthed loser who is quickly befriended by television producer Gina Yaweth (given excellent desperation and blind-focus by Jami Bassman). Yaweth quickly convinces Phelps to sign a contract for his starring role in the ultimate television reality show – The Dead Guy. Dougie the cameraman (dryly portrayed by Michael DeNato) begins his 24/7 coverage of Phelps, much of which is shared with the audience through the bank of television and one big screen monitors.

As Eldon's mother and brother, Roberta and Virgil, Mary Bricker and John Cisar add much. Bricker's brassy, rough-cut matriarch covers the spectrum as she initially berates her son for such a choice, then shows her true colors during the airing of the final show. The ever-versatile Cisar folds a Jethro Bodine-like lovability into his character, especially in a very hilarious scene with an armload of unruly ramen. He also flexes his character actor muscles with some fun cameo roles.

As the hometown girlfriend, Christy Moline (given wide-eyed yet smoldering depth by Shoshana Salowitz) is first repulsed, then attracted to a transformed Eldon. Travis Cherniss, as Leon, rounds out the cast, not only portraying a quirkish orderly at a hospital, but also as the pre-show warm-up comedian. Salowitz and Bricker also double as very memorable and hilarious Disneyland hookers for Eldon.

The resultant interplay spins along an almost out of control path, as the daily monitoring of method of death shifts from begin hit by a bus or fatal chainsaw, to dying in his sleep, eventually to the final choice of the audience voting online. "The Dead Guy" is for anyone who has seen more than enough of reality TV. This show carries this genre to its absurdist extreme, through fine ensemble acting and delightful physical comedy. TFAC continues to build on its strong reputation for engaging theatre priced to entice patrons to a most gratifying evening of entertainment. Take some time from the holiday grind, and unwind with the surprising "Dead Guy."