

'Boston Marriage' – gets you to the church (of TFAC) on time

Theatrical review by John Busbee, The Culture Buzz & KFMG-LP 99.1 FM

Theater...for a change (TFAC) boldly tackles the challenging work of David Mamet in their current production, "Boston Marriage." A significant part of TFAC's appeal continues to be the company's willingness to stretch boundaries, and bring Greater Des Moines audiences works that otherwise would probably not be presented in this market. Couple that with TFAC's mission to provide emerging, yet experienced, talent both on stage and behind the scenes opportunities to direct, design and perform, and the stage is set for a performing arts company that has a passionate approach to its productions, and to its growing ranks of patrons.

A trio of talented actresses deliver Mamet's story of two bantering, scheming "women of fashion" who have long lived together on the fringes of upper-class society. Anna (Suzy Oddy) has just become the mistress of a wealthy man, from whom she has received an enormous emerald and an income to match. Claire (Rachel Salowitz), meanwhile, is infatuated with a respectable young lady and wants to enlist the jealous Anna's help for an assignation. As the two women exchange barbs and take turns taunting Anna's hapless Scottish parlor maid, Catherine (Susan Gulbranson), Claire's young inamorata suddenly appears, setting off a crisis that puts both the valuable emerald and the women's futures at risk.

Producing artistic director Thatcher Williams once again shakes up the usual physical space within Grand View College's Viking Theatre, to produce a stadium seating arrangement sandwiching a Victorian-like scenic design. This gives first-time TFAC Director Mark Littlejohn a more focused area in which to stage Mamet's play. However, Littlejohn still needs to quicken the pacing from opening night's performance to better achieve the crackling style of interchange Mamet's dialogue deserves. Even though written "in the style of Oscar Wilde," the pacing was sometimes tentative on opening night, but will surely find its tempo.

Oddy brings a deceitful indulgence to Anna, as she parries and counters with her paramour, Claire, played with ambiguity yet occasional bite by Salowitz. There are many delectable exchanges between these two, with the two continually leveraging for best advantage. Oddy especially excels with some physical comedy that enhances her dialogue. Anna's initial preening with a bosom-full of emeralds soon segues into the reality that her Claire has found another to fan the flames of passion. The plot takes a delightful twist when the relationship of Claire's new love and Anna's benefactor collide, leaving the chaotic shards of their previous blissful "Boston Marriage."

The program would have done patrons a service, too, by providing more historical background for the play's title. In its most simplistic definition, Boston marriage was a term used in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries for households where two women lived together, independent of any male support.

Shining in her role, Gulbranson imbues Catherine with a wonderfully consistent Scottish accent, and some of the best comic deliveries of the evening. As the verbal shuttlecock being hammered between the two combatants like a winner-take-all badminton match, Catherine proves resilient.

"Boston Marriage" continues January 24-27, and is well worth the nominal ticket prices TFAC charges.