

Fish Town Players present "The Savannah Disputation" at the Gorton Theater in Gloucester, Mass

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Review by Betsy Retallack

Disputing for 'All Eternity'

The opening line of "Are you saved?" sets the tone for a series of questions and revelations that are the meat of the banter that the Fish Town Players unveil with impeccable comedic timing. Twists and turns of thought are dished out to us in smooth Southern charm in this intimate living room of religion and human need. Who comes calling, a nurse with test results or a missionary to Catholics, sets the audience on an equal playing field of humanity and faith. There was something hospitable about being allowed to see and hear Mary's inner rants against all other humans who may either want her saved or be her friend. This Mary (played by Kristine Burke) had every possible cruel glare practiced to perfection, drawing the audience in to truly suspend our belief in her crankiest self. Margaret, the dower and fearful sister(played by Jessie Sorrells) managed with sincere presence to draw us into her world of ambiguity once faced with the fiery challenges of the evangelist, Melissa(played by Lauren Ashly Suchecki) and manipulations of her sister. Melissa delivers amazing monologues , never missing a beat in her tireless effort to convert the sisters. Her sure fire southern slickness reveals the gamut of overconfidence, to disgust with rejection, to repentant apology. Jay Diprima plays Father Patrick Murphy with cool confidence, expressive even while eating banana pudding. When his patience runs out to set the sisters straight he delivers a convincing authority as a priest might and yet delivers his sternness with the tenderness of an old friend.

As the debates ensue over who's 'right' , who's got the right answers or who's got the right religion, the characters lead us ever so carefully into their transformations and revelations. "We'll see who's going to hell now!" is the perfect summation of the confusion everyone seems to be up against, but no one wants to relent from even misguided or misinformed beliefs. Father Murphy

attempts to be the voice of reason even when hoodwinked into an evening of mismanaged disputes, setting up the scripture straw men to prove a point of translation misnomer and “copies of copies of copies” lost in translation. What is the ‘truth?’ is what the audience is asking with the players to see if they will be able solve this puzzle. Murphy says, you believe what you believe and they believe what they believe and you leave it alone....no proselitizing for him.

The music chosen for this production, *Jesus is Just Alright With Me*, at the first act, gives us that casual approach to consider religion. Later, *Sympathy for the Devil*, seems to indicate that another force is at work here. The beginning of the shift in where everyone stands has found us listening to “a change in the weather”.

The human revelations of personal sufferings and lost love are juxtaposed with the struggle to keep up all religious appearances in the midst of personal ‘reveals’ to the audience. The priest as celibate, the missionary’s entanglement with the pastor, Mary’s husband who left her and Margaret’s one love lost in a forgotten proposal. These darker stories are connected with quick wit, “I’m smart enough to know I’m stupid”.

The story set in the south could possibly have an even deeper meaning for that audience as does those who are familiar with Catholic and Protestant differences. Even if you have never been from any religious persuasion, the performance stands on its own and takes you for a spirited ride right into its own eternity.