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**Field Experiences in Theatre Education**  
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### **Review #1: The Savannah Disputation**

With today's matinee performance, The Fishtown Players' production of Evan Smith's *The Savannah Disputation* concluded its ten-day run at the Gorton Theatre in Gloucester, MA. This contemporary drama was produced by Michael McNamara, directed by David McCaleb and starred four accomplished local actors whose work may be familiar to north shore audiences: Kristine Burke, Jay DiPrima, Jessie Sorrells and Lauren Suchecki.

The play's action is comprised of five scenes that take place within a few days' time and is set in the living and dining rooms of a Savannah, Georgia home sometime in the recent past. It tells the story of two Roman Catholic past-middle-age sisters living together who become engaged in ruminations about faith with both their parish priest and a young door-to-door Christian missionary. Do you ever wonder what might happen if you opened your door to pamphlet wielding missionaries? This play imagines that scenario. When timid spinster Margaret invites missionary Melissa in to chat about the downside of Roman Catholicism and possible conversion to a small sect of Catholicism, Margaret's cynical sister Mary resents the intrusion and puts Father Murphy in a position to come up with a spontaneous rebuttal. What ensued in the Fishtown Players' production was a pontification of faith made several shades lighter by comedic lines of dialogue and character traits brought to life with deft directing and skilled performances.

The actresses cast in the roles of the sisters smartly embodied their contrasting natures. Jessie Sorrells captured Margaret's uncertainty and imbued a lifetime of timidity into her posture, shuffling walk, apologetic facial expressions and line deliveries. Her body closed in on itself protectively while she opened her mind to questioning elements of her faith that she has long accepted in rote routine. Kristine Burke shined in the role of Mary, using her voice, face and body to convey a street-smart cynicism infused at times with feelings of betrayal, rage, confusion and remorse. Burke's portrayal of vulnerability and humility in the last scene showed a glimpse at the depth of character lurking beneath Mary's toughened outer shell. Both actresses' accents evoked the Southern setting.

Lauren Asly Suchecki inhabited Melissa the missionary with a flighty friendliness and religious passion wrapped in a sugary sweet Southern drawl. Suchecki was able to mix down to earth approachability and relatability with focused fervor of faith without pretension. Jay DiPrima made listening and considering sides of an argument while eating banana pudding an art form—for listening is what his character does for lengths at a time. The playwright does this to show the restraint with which this intelligent man of god will enter into areas where he must flex his moral authority; this makes his moral authority that much stronger. That DiPrima conveyed all kinds of emotions—interest, patience, understanding, annoyance, frustration, disappointment, incredulity, reverence—with facial expressions and body language that rang spontaneously genuine is a testament to his many talents. When finally speaking his peace, DiPrima's father Murphy was erudite, fair-minded and compassionate.

The costumes echoed the character traits brought to life by the team of actors: Margaret shrank into her protective sweaters; Mary's attire was suitably practical; Melissa's clothing flattered her single-and-looking figure; Father Murphy was dressed in aptly casual clothing (the fact that he doesn't

sport the traditional priest's collar was likely to support the script's slow reveal of his profession to Melissa). Also supporting the performances was the work of director David McCaleb. He ably moved the action around the thrust stage, making good use of the living and dining spaces, the perimeter and related fourth wall – particularly when Mary watched television or sat quietly absorbing the action behind her. Similarly, Ray Jenness' set reflected the simple traditions the sisters have lived with. The furniture was worn but well maintained. Generic baskets of laundry, DVDs, and books lay strewn about, as did stacks of local newspapers. Featured prominently were religious statues and candles that adorned a mantel on the center of the upstage wall. Henry Cooper's lighting was mostly a general bright wash, but at times emphasized what could be considered the play's fifth character: an answering machine largely recording calls from a doctor's office receptionist. A spotlight effect accentuated this element of the play, which was a reminder of known mortality amid disputation of biblical interpretations and questions about the hereafter.

*The Savannah Disputation's* themes extend beyond faith and religion. Fear of what can and cannot be known is a strong component of the play, as is loneliness—both in a physical and spiritual sense. Welded to the exploration of religious doctrine is a consideration of the veracity of language, particularly the written word as it is passed along to convey ideas and events over the ages. The concept of intelligence is also examined with a discussion of whether we humans think we are too smart to know how dumb we are. However, it is the act of listening to truly hear and understand that perhaps resonates most loudly. When Mary and Margaret must recite words they say every week at mass to truly hear and understand them, one may question: How well do we know the things we see and hear all the time? “Are you listening?” characters ask one another at several times throughout the play. One character's response: “If you never hear it in the first place, you never have to believe it.”

Today's Fishtown Players' audience—who had been listening attentively—was left questioning. Some lingering questions may pertain to religion while others may concern the fate of the play's characters. (I am personally left wondering about the answering machine messages: Which sister were the calls for? Did she ever call back? What were her results?) When it comes to matters of faith, the play asks of the audience the same question that is asked of Father Murphy: “What do you believe?” His response: “When something is too complicated to figure out for yourself, you bow to a higher authority.” It is a philosophy that could be applied to and adopted by anyone, and leaves ‘higher authority’ open to liberal interpretation.

If theatre's role is to “hold a mirror up to nature,” with *The Savannah Disputation*, the Fishtown Players successfully provided audiences with a looking glass in which each individual could see the truths reflected.