

ESCAPE FROM HAPPINESS REVIEW

Ben Franklin quipped ... “any fool can criticize... and in fact, most fools do”. Judging others creativity is tricky business. Flattery may be unbelievable and criticisms unforgivable. Honesty may be unforgettable and fruitful. Critics have a role but there are rules. The goal is to foster communication between the craft, creators and community.

For non original plays, I do my homework. Also, not being omniscient and a servant to the community and not my own ego, I offer directors the opportunity to talk. Although reviews focus on the production, rather than the script, nobody is fooled by trying to polish pooh and critics need to address a poor script when necessary.

Critics summarize the plot in the context of themes, conflicts and denouement, (final revelations) while not giving away crucial twists. Acting remains key. Do the actors understand and live their characters, both verbally and non-verbally. Do they connect with each other? What about technical aspects; sights and sounds, costumes and sets, music and motion. Do they enhance or dominate? Critics relate the gist to prospective audiences. Is the production entertaining, informative, profound, complex, simple, cryptic, logical, warm, frightening, abstract, dark, and rife with twists, restrained or ribald? Finally, where does the play soar and where is it sore?

Every mother has a perfect baby; so it is with artists. Sensitivities run high when babies are displayed but honesty can not be sacrificed at the altar of affability. Live theatre is neither a rich buffet for every palette nor always well prepared. It is a contract between director, playwright, audience and critic to dine on emotional, intellectual and visceral levels. Consider me your Maitre’ D and sommelier and let’s dig in.

Escape From Happiness, by Canadian George Walker, received the 1992 Canadian DORA (Tony equivalent). This sentimental at its core dark comedy, meticulously plotted with sophisticated characterizations about an extremely dysfunctional family, is seasoned with a whodunit twist. It is tough to direct, cast and digest and is for R rated palettes. Done well, it is entertaining and nutritious fare.

The evening began with a stop action music video retrospective of Darkroom Productions followed by a short film of crazed felons assaulting the witless and easily led son in law, Junior (Justin Dupuis) in the kitchen, a la Clockwork Orange. Although I laud the talent and triumphs of Darkroom and the directors desire to stay on script, both get in the way.

Cutting to live action, Junior, bloodied and in pain is surrounded by his frantic wife, Gail (Jennifer Jovez), and his mother in law Nora (Carol Schafer) who is rather bizarrely blasé’... “Get up, Junior! You’re killing us with your misery.” Funny stuff

Tom (Mike Waterson), the once abusive father, reappears strangely demented ten years after abandoning his wife and three now grown daughters. He is shunned by all except Gail and nonchalant

Nora amazingly denies his identity even though he now lives with her. Two detectives arrive to investigate; Mike (John Epperson) a regular Joe and concrete thinking cop, and Dian (Lanea Amick) a snooty, annoying, self-adoring conniving, and intellectual wanna-be vixen. They clash like the red and brick two tone set. The middle child, Mary-Ann (Taylor Thorngate), is addicted to psycho babble and perpetually at a crossroads in her own self-obsessed refusal to grow past adolescence, and eldest sister Elizabeth (Melissa Quine), a lesbian lawyer and self proclaimed avenging angel for police brutality victims round out the funny farm. Drugs are discovered in the basement and Nora is arrested. Elizabeth captures one of Junior's attackers. The father, Rolly (Fred Beeman), with his neurotic son Stevie (Trevor Wright), comprises a bungling, penny anty, porn peddling low life duo. Fueled by addled Tom wishing redemption, an amusing climactic twist follows.

'Idiot symphonies' we enshroud ourselves in may seem to help us cope while in fact they serve as a sentence to Escape From Happiness. Denial will not carry the day, deceit receives just desserts, personal resurrection does not insure forgiveness, addiction to adolescence is useless, indignation often turns crusaders into shrew-like vigilantes, those waiting for something to be done for them usually have something done to them, and delusions of genius usually reveal stupidity. The script emblazons these messages

However, most of the ensemble did not. Often, lines were hurriedly recited rather than lived. Powerful, nuanced scripts such as this frequently fall prey to the mistake of substituting speed and volume for intensity, pathos, drama, complexity and rhythmic verbal and non verbal pacing. Director/actor John Epperson stands as a flawless clear exception. In addition, Beeman (Rolly) quickly developed and stole many moments.

The dysfunctional buffet served up by Darkroom was bold and the script meal sumptuous. However, the presentation could stand to simmer a little with some seasoned directorial savvy.

Kevin Ryan is a retired Colonel, physician, musician and author who lives in Fairfield.