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## Three cheers for 'Heroes'

Stormfield Theatre scores again with ace production of Tom Stoppard's comedy about World War I vets

by Mary C. Cusack



In its second season, Stormfield Theatre is proving itself to be the little theater that can — that is, they can produce high-quality shows that so transfix an audience that one easily forgets there is a sports bar to the rear and a Sears across the parking lot. For its latest production, Stormfield transports audiences to a quaint terrace outside a small French village.

"Heroes" is the story of three World War I vets who reside in a group home for retired veterans. Gustave (Gary Houston) has arrived only six months ago, and is already bored with the inactivity of the daily routine. He attempts to enlist his friends Philippe (Richard Marlatt) and Henri (Richard Henzel) to go AWOL.

The play is an adaptation by Tom Stoppard, known for witty works such as "Shakespeare in Love" and "Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead." The original play by Gerald Sibleyras was titled "Le Vent De Peupliers," which roughly translates into "The Wind in the Poplars." The title change is apropos, given that the work is about the characters more than the destination. Stoppard's "Heroes" brings to mind the line from David Bowie's song of the same name: "We can be heroes, just for one day." These men dream of recapturing their glory days, even if only temporarily.

The script is quick and funny. There are a few necessary moments of raw human emotion, but the play never devolves into a psychological quagmire. In fact, at the end very little is known about any one of the characters, which works. It's not so important where these men have been, rather where they are going.

In the hands of a lesser cast, the script itself would be the star. However, this cast elevates the already tight script with their onstage camaraderie. They begin the play as a group of familiars who bitch and banter and freely exhibit their petty jealousies and insecurities. Henri, who has been at the home for 25 years, is threatened by the growing friendship between Philippe and Gustave. Philippe has been Henri's friend at the home for 10 years, yet newcomer Gustave has, in six months, become close enough to Philippe to read and answer Philippe's correspondence with his family.

Houston's Gustave is a closet dreamer who cloaks himself in cynicism, sarcasm and misanthropy. His delivery is sharp, especially when he engages Henzel's Henri. Despite having spent so many years at the home, Henri is an optimist who still finds delight in life's little pleasures, especially the sight of a pretty girl. Philippe, who suffers seizures from shrapnel in his head, is affable and malleable enough to become a pawn in the struggle for leadership between Gustave and Henri.

Stormfield artistic director, Kristine Thatcher, and her staff continue to maximize their resources to present professional quality theater in the strip mall space. Thatcher, in the director's chair for "Heroes," has assembled a fantastic cast of professionals who have worked with her and/or each other in various iterations. This familiarity goes a long way in building the bonds shared by the characters.

Not only does Thatcher utilize her vast network of industry contacts to assemble a top-notch cast, but she also taps local talents like Michigan State University Department of Theatre Chairman Kirk Domer and Head of Acting and Directing Rob Roznowski to help on the set crew. As if these guys don't have enough to do as the fall semester kicks in?

Domer's set design and Tim Fox's lighting are spot-on in creating a terrace that is an open space that yet confines the characters. The cast inhabits the warm environment with such veracity that when they look offstage toward the poplar trees swaying in the distance, one wants to turn around and look, too.

The play opens with Gustave grouching about the impending fall and winter, a feeling with which Michigan audiences can relate. Yet the quality of the production, the quirkiness of the characters, and the underlying optimistic tone staves off the coming gloom for a little while longer.

### 'Heroes'

Stormfield Theatre, 201 Morgan Lane, Lansing. Through Sept. 18. 7 p.m. Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays

\$18 Thursdays, \$24 Fridays and Saturdays; \$20 Sundays; \$3 off for veterans; \$2 off for seniors 65 and up; \$10 students

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