

rogue | critic

Friday
Sep092011

HEROES

Sometimes, people are not the conflict; sometimes it's the passage of time itself, or other circumstances beyond our control. What is so often overlooked in drama is that we don't necessarily rail against these things; sometimes we observe, and accede, and it's not necessarily a surrender. This is the essence of the excellent *Heroes*, adapted and translated from Gerald Sibleyras's *Le Vent De Peupliers* by playwright Tom Stoppard. Neither a return to the trenches nor a weary white flag, the Stormfield Theatre production examines a trio of war veterans in the autumn of their years; under the direction of Kristine Thatcher, thoughtful performances and winning teamwork make for an experience as captivating as it is fond and warm.

In August 1959, in a nun-staffed veterans military hospital in the French countryside, residents Philippe (Richard Marlatt), Gustave (Gary Houston), and Henri (Richard Henzel) pass the time together on the remote back terrace. Their histories, ages, injuries, and time spent convalescing are all different — whereas tender Henri has nursed his bum leg for decades, randy Philippe increasingly feels the effects of a remnant of shrapnel; bristly Gustave boasts of his return to the service when the Nazis took Paris, but reveals no evidence of any wound from either World War. They spend time together by choice, and although petty disagreements serve to pass the time, their friendship is evident; it proves easy to like these men because of how readily they like each other. Curiously, one of their main points of commonality is a leftover military mentality, a shared language upon which they draw to protect their turf from interlopers or to strategize approaching a pretty young woman seen around town. Over scenes spanning several weeks, everyday activities and larger developments all serve as portals into the men's separate characters and philosophies, as everything from a fellow patient's birthday party to the fate of an ornamental stone dog sheds light on their psyches.

Anchoring this narratively static but emotionally dynamic text are the powerful performances of Henzel, Houston, and Marlatt, excelling individually and together. Caustic to the point of hilarity, Houston brings out the contrasts in loudly eschewing other people and craving attention, being a take-charge person and needing to feel important. Marlatt's conspiracy-theorist tendencies play into his own failing health, as he searches for external sources of intrigue to distract him from a terrifying decline. As the wise realist of the group, Henzel generously builds up the happiness of others to defer attention from himself; he is also the most at ease with his life's trajectory, and the actor's matter-of-fact delivery of a late heavy-handed monologue is astounding in its weight and sincerity.

Sibleyras and Stoppard provide the barest whiff of a plot in the trio's aim to break out of the hospital and set themselves loose on the world — although why anyone would voluntarily leave designer Kirk Domer's resplendent patio setting pushes the bounds of credulity. Everything is warm late-summer sun and lived-in dress clothes (courtesy of Tim Fox and Holly Iler, respectively), with an indulgent instrumental soundtrack by sound designer Sergei Kvitko.

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Carolyn Hayes
is the Rogue
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