



February 19, 2009

Williamston's production is daring and impressive

Ken Glickman

For the Lansing State Journal

The Williamston Theatre is pushing the edge of the envelope with its current production of "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds." To mount a production of this size and difficulty in a theater as intimate as Williamston is - to put it mildly - bold.

First kudos must go to set designer Kirk Domer, who manages to build a two-level house, complete with grimy refrigerator, stove and sink on Williamston's postage-stamp size stage. It's a marvel of detail and design.

Second kudos go to director John Lepard. "Gamma Rays" is an intense play that tells the story of a dysfunctional family comprised of a mother, her two daughters, a rabbit and a deaf woman invalid (played wonderfully by an unrecognizable Gloria Vivalda). Despite the play's darkness, Lepard brings forth precise and emotional performances from the entire cast.

Emily Sutton-Smith, usually a pretty and magnetic character on stage, is a different person here. She plays Beatrice, an angry woman who can't find any ray of sunshine in her troubled life, and strikes out at anyone near her.

But the star of show is Michigan State University sophomore Jennifer Shafer who plays Beatrice's brilliant daughter, Tillie. Living in a life where roadblocks impede any path to happiness, Tillie discovers the wonders of science. Although Tillie is plain and serious, Shafer's acting gives the character confidence, strength and sensitivity. The audience roots for her and is not disappointed.

Kellyn Uhl, also an MSU sophomore, plays Tillie's pretty and self-centered sister Ruth. Uhl is very effective in her role, but the character does not have the depth of Tillie.

"Gamma Rays" won a Pulitzer Prize in its 1970 Broadway run, and was also made into a movie with Joanne Woodward and directed by her husband, Paul Newman.

It's a complex family drama with no easy answers and only a glimmer of hope. Lepard brings the play to life by powerful directing that guides his cast into an impressive ensemble unit.

Additional Facts

Strong 'Rays'

- » The show: "The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds"
- » The venue: Williamston Theatre, 122 S. Putnam St., Williamston
- » The performances: 8 p.m. Thursdays and Fridays, 3 p.m. and 8 p.m. Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays, through March 1
- » The tickets: \$18 Thursdays, \$24 Friday and Saturday evenings, \$20 weekend matinees; senior tickets are \$2 less, all student seats are \$10. Get them at 655-SHOW.