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## A production with permanent value at the BoarsHead

By Robert Bethune

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"Permanent Collection" by Thomas Gibbons, now on stage at Lansing's BoarsHead Theater, is beautifully designed to be inflammatory. Nothing stirs passionate controversy like clashing rights, and Gibbon's play accomplishes that in multiple ways. Racial justice versus personal vision, fidelity to original intentions versus the demands of new times, the claims of competing cultures, the need for comfort and continuity against the demands of growth and change - all these conflicts deftly pit parts of us against other parts of us.

Kristine Thatcher's direction is strikingly low-key - an oxymoron, but it fits. She lets the play speak for itself, while ensuring the necessary physical vitality and emotional commitment. Without those qualities, it could be as dead as bad Shaw; with those qualities, it is as lively as any impassioned debate can be.

We spend the evening with two sharply drawn characters: Sterling North, high-powered black survivor from white corporate America, and Paul Barrow, art historian, academic, political innocent. The bone of contention is the soul of the Morris Foundation, founded by an acerbic, eccentric art lover whose will totally controls the foundation. Does that will constitute racial discrimination? North and Barrow battle it out tooth and nail against the complex background of racial conflict in America.

Alan Bomar Jones plays North using all his powerful voice and body. Michael Joseph Mitchell as Barrow is the classic academic: small, seemingly frail, but possessed of great inner energy that eventually makes him a full match for North. These two, plus an excellent supporting cast, make this an evening well worth watching.

There are weaknesses in Gibbon's handling of the story that become apparent toward the end of the piece. Perhaps I can put it this way, and as the Watchman says in the "Oresteia," avoid spoilers for those who know, and those who don't won't notice: The end of the play portrays how these struggles actually play out in the real world, in which life does not follow art.

The design work overall is basically well conceived and executed. I had no difficulty believing in the works of art on stage - a mine field cleanly navigated by property designer Patricia A. York. The intention of Kirk Domer's handsome set is clear enough. We see North's office and the main gallery at the same time. But the layout and lighting kept making me see the space as North's office instead of the main gallery. Domer leaves some painting frames empty, and I never did see the point of that. I pick these nits with my critic's hat on; as a spectator, I enjoyed the production and recommend it warmly.

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