

rogue | critic

Sunday
Feb242013

END DAYS

Boiled down to two words, *End Days* (by Deborah Zoe Lauffer) is beset by oddity and wonder. A collaboration of Williamston Theatre and the Michigan State University Department of Theatre, as well as a co-production with West Bloomfield's Jewish Ensemble Theatre, this goofy parable of a far-flung collection of misfits approaching the end of the world is wonderfully odd. Yet at the same time, director Tony Caselli ensures that the production's true appeal is in the thorough character work and engrossing relationships that make it oddly wonderful.

The world of the Steins is an unusual one, where the presence of a high-school Elvis (Eric Eilersen) is no more unexpected than that of the household Jesus (Andrew Head). Despondent dad Arthur (John Manfredi) has been sleepwalking through life in the two years since 9/11, whereas alarmist mom Sylvia (Emily Sutton-Smith) is distracted with newfound evangelical zeal, fixated on saving souls from the impending Rapture. This leaves sixteen-year-old daughter Rachel (Lydia Hiller) confused, massively undersupervised, and acting out in a furious search for meaning. Her rebellion takes physical form in costumer Lane Frangomeli's outstanding statement wear; behaviorally, beyond mere teenaged sourness, her forbidden pursuits of (gasp!) science and casual drug use combine into a fanciful, iconic spirit guide of sorts: hallucinatory Stephen Hawking (Head again, in acutely bifurcated roles). This addition, too, is accepted with little resistance; that anything is possible is a given in the world of this play, even — or, rather, especially — that it could end at any moment.

The first act is an amalgam of establishing scenes in various locales across a single set (designer Kirk Domer's skeletally abstract building blocks, which pack a wallop of a subtle visual reference). These glimpses pass briskly into each other, thanks to shifting lighting cues by Ryan Davies and electronica-inspired clock-tick transitions by Jason Painter Price. Through the different environs, the audience sees Hiller reluctantly aligning with new kid Eilersen as he accepts de rigueur torments for dressing like a dead rock idol. We see Manfredi splendidly reawaken as he and Eilersen boost and support each other, pushing the former to leave the house on a simple errand, and the latter to excel at his upcoming Bar Mitzvah. Meanwhile, Sylvia is out spreading the good word with Jesus ever by her side; more pertinently, we see Head's few kind words and Mona Lisa muteness cause Sutton-Smith to infer the date of the Rapture, and panic that she has mere days to convince and convert her family or else lose them to damnation.

With a deadline thus established and the stakes raised sky high, the second act aligns and moves in a single direction — in this scenario, someone must be right and someone else wrong, and there is little to do but wait and see. In contrast to the brevity-embracing vignettes of the first act, the second has the sustained, patient feel of a bottle episode, locking the family in at home base with nothing but time, the television, and properties designer Alex Gay's delightful horde of edibles. This holding pattern pays off in

ROGUE TWEETS

#lastchance
to lose hold
of time
while
waiting in
one static
place:
10:53
@WilliamstonThtr.
Choreography
(Jones)
adds kicky
pitter to
Hopper's
tongue-
twisting
patter.
#reasonstosee
70, Girls,
70
@MBTheatre,
through
6/23.
Sound
design
(Sage)
knows
when to
goof on the
classics,
knows
when to
flourish.
#reasonstosee
I Hate
Hamlet
@TPTNorthville,
through
6/30.
The mighty
Roth,
sporting
ringleader
ease and a
belt to
match.
#reasonstosee
70, Girls,
70
@MBTheatre,
through
6/23.
Birch in
grief: just
five
stages?
Hardly,
Denial,
anger,
coping, bad
TV, guilt,
stupor...
#reasonstosee
10:53
@WilliamstonThtr.
through
6/16.
Designer
Wetzel's
daring
onstage
swing
work feels
freeing, not

increasingly honest and remarkable engagement, as the characters are forced to contend with each other and the values and desires that fuel their convictions. It's here that the fine groundwork laid in the first act pays off in even more splendid performances: Sutton-Smith's restless fervor and desperate need for her loved ones' cooperation; Hiller's emboldened combativeness undercut by an enduring stubborn streak; Manfredi's long-dormant attention and affection snapping open like a flower; Eilerson's irresistible tag-along sweetness; Head's hilariously intrusive and increasingly sardonic appraisals. What happens among them spells out a clear message despite never being verbalized; the radiant warmth and character achievements speak for themselves.

End Days is certainly notable for the bizarre idiosyncrasies of its quirky world, but the true payoff here comes from emotionally doubling down on its cadre of disparately dissatisfied characters. The resulting production strikes at commonalities and makes strides that far outstrip just over two hours of journeying. This revelatory work is a one-two punch of peculiarity and pure humanity that resounds with humor and depth, whose unassuming tonal eccentricity masks its masterful, passionate heart.

End Days is no longer playing.

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death
 defying.
 #reasonstosee
 Roaming
 Charges
 @DetroitRep,
 through
 6/23.
 Summer
 means
 Shakespeare: start
 the season
 regally with
 tragic
 monarch
 Lynch
 Travis.
 Cymbeline
 @
 Shakespeare
 West,
 #now playing
 through
 6/29.

Older

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 the Rogue**

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 ROGUE

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 commentary.
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 to Lansing.

Carolyn Hayes
 is the Rogue
 Critic, est. late
 2009.

In 2011, the
 Rogue
 attended 155
 plays,
 readings, and
 festivals
 (about 3 per
 week) and
 penned 115
 reviews (about
 2.2 per week).

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