

The Culture Buzz

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Engaging premier raises an entertaining flap

Theatrical review by John Busbee for The Culture Buzz

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Old versus new. Personal agendas versus collegiality. Spice up the usual office dynamics with a psychiatric practice's setting, and "Flutter the Dovecotes" earns high marks in its premier run. Playwright Christine Meinecke, a licensed psychologist with Iowa Playwrights Workshop training, dips her pen into the ink of her professional world, and crafts an entertaining, appealing two-act romp through the mercurial psyches of the fictional folks working in a psychiatry office. The results reveal that our differences perhaps don't separate us as much as we would like to think, with just enough separation so we aren't looking at ourselves in the mirror.

"Flutter the Dovecotes," playing to a nearly sold-out house, follows the residual effects of the practice's founder's recent death. The office manager demands starched traditions, the son tries to emulate his late father, one partner affably suggests medication as the panacea for whatever ails you, another seems a bit too stable, a student who works as an aide is perhaps the most honest of the lot, and the son's wife (and, sibling to the pill prescribing partner) is set up for an epiphanal moment. This play is the fourth winner in a growing list of successful shows premiering thanks to Tallgrass Theatre Company's dedication to showcasing new works. This annual event should be on every theatre-goers calendar, as the scripts have been solid, the production values excellent, and the intimate setting in the Rex Mathes Auditorium, home to West Des Moines' independent theatre company, is sublime.

Meinecke gives the Tallgrass production team a solid script with which to work. The two-act show is further divided into quick-changing scenes, moving the story along. The characters have depth, and quickly come to their own as the action unfolds. Meinecke displays a deft talent for dialogue, with several snappy exchanges between characters, and a penchant for infusing refreshing humor in her dialogue.

As the starched-panties office manager, Nancy, Barbara Merrill Wagner clings to her distorted vision of carrying the patriarch's wishes forward through professional, strict protocol. Merrill's facial twisting reinforces her entitled attitudes, in an office where she has badgered and cowed her co-workers relentlessly. The residual effects of her opinionated behavior has taken its toll on the others. Jolene Rice plays Eva, the son's wife, and the only non-staff member in the show. She radiates her own sense of entitlement. Rice's transition from the aloof spouse is nicely done. As one of the partners, Caroline, Jeanette Bodermann embraces her grounded role with an ease that belies the hot button waiting to be pressed late in the show. As the aide working his way through college, John Christian Spinks brings a buoyant, innocent charm to his Ronnie. His joie de vie attitude is great fun. Jason Rainwater plays Martin, the son trying to fill his father's large shoes. Rainwater cloaks himself with the hyper-nervous energy of a caffeinated mouse, bent on his solitary goal of success through public visibility...with less-than-desired outcomes.

The standout in this solid cast is Bob Baskerville as Larry, the third partner. He brings an affable, natural style to his character, quickly drawing the audience into his world. Baskerville's character actor skills shine as he adroitly leads the action in his scenes.

Once again, Tallgrass completes the beauty of this performance experience with a superb scenic design by Tim Phifer, as the company does what it does best: deliver excellent productions at an appealing price. This show appeals for its fine script, and a cast that can deliver the goods. "Flutter the Dovecotes" runs Fridays and Saturdays through January 30, and is sure to deliver a natural high that no prescribed medication could match.