

Theater review: Play offers zany look at mental health

MICHAEL MORAIN • MMORAIN@DMREG.COM • JANUARY 19, 2010

The characters in Tallgrass Theatre's new comedy about psychiatrists aren't any crazier than average, but their shenanigans - and solutions - probably are.

"Let me prescribe something for you," one clinic staffer jokes to another. "We could hit those dopamine receptors with a little somethin'-somethin'."

He doesn't actually dole out any pills, but the show itself, called "Flutter the Dovecotes," delivers an ample dose of laughter, a shot of insight and a little somethin'-somethin' of its own.

The original script, by Des Moines psychologist Christine Meinecke, was selected from the fourth annual Iowa Playwrights Workshop in October and is the first of Meinecke's plays to be produced. It isn't perfect - the slower second act veers toward omphaloskepsis (known in layman's terms as navel-gazing) - but overall it's a zany, imaginative glimpse into a world Meinecke obviously knows well. Not only is she a shrink herself, she's been married to one for 28 years.

"Mental health professionals ought to be models of impeccable mental health," according to her note in the program. "Experts in behavior change must handle change in their own lives with style and grace ... right?"

Wrong-o. As Meinecke's story clearly demonstrates, psychiatrists aren't immune to the mental and emotional snags they try to untangle in their patients.

Here, the action takes place in the staff lounge of a successful practice (decked out with an ornate fireplace and a view of a beautiful city skyline by set designer Tim Phifer), where the doctors and their assistants are still adjusting to the power vacuum created by the death of their most prominent colleague.

It didn't help that he had an affair with the office manager (the delightfully grouchy Barbara Merrill Wagner), who bullies the staff like a fussy mother hen. She has little patience for her late lover's narcissistic son (Jason Rainwater), his trophy wife (Jolene Rice), the office comedian (Bob Baskerville), the new-age free spirit (Jeanette Bodermann) or the flamboyant receptionist (John Christian Spinks, in an unfortunately tight pair of corduroy pants).

Together the characters navigate the office politics in an office that had once been quiet. (The play's title is an expression that means "to cause a stir in a quiet setting." A dovecote is a nesting coop for doves or pigeons.)

The stage seems crowded from time to time, but director Maranda Turner has a light sit-com touch, guiding the show from scene to scene before anything spins out of control. Each time the characters push their limits, the lights go dark and jazz pipes in to signal a transition.

While that pace works well in the show's first hour, it wears thin in the second, when one wishes the show would expand outward with new surprises rather than spiraling in toward its somewhat inevitable conclusion.

The actors perform well - Baskerville and Bodermann develop an easy rapport, and Rainwater's vain tantrums are fun to watch - but they too often discuss what the audience can figure out for themselves. In short, there's too much self-analysis.