

The Cemetery Club: A Review

by Mary Winski

Friendship, marriage, love, death: these huge themes moved minds and hearts at The Heritage Hunt Little Theater's incredible gutsy production of Ivan Menchell's *The Cemetery Club*. This play, with all the magnificent people involved in it, took a chance. It dared to open the hard parts of our lives at this age, an age of loss and change and growth. And it opened them poignantly, with laughter and tears.

Director Bets Knepley led this courageous departure from this theater's already successful history. She raised the high bar and invited us to witness a small cast of talented actors soar. Not bolstered by the large casts of past performances, five stood together on stage and invited the hundreds in attendance on the four nights to laugh loudly, and think deeply.

Three lifelong friends, Lanna Krogman as Ida, Tina Mullins as Lucille and Gayle Chisholm as Doris, have made a ritual of visiting their husbands' graves in the four years since Doris's husband Abe's death. Their humor and banter and shared history have blued them into fascinating relationships we get to watch unfold. Ida, at once vulnerable and strong, seems ready to move on though she clearly loved her husband Hurray. Lucille is bent on spending her late husband Harry's money on fury bargains and finding romance to balance his unfaithfulness. Doris devotes her life to her Spouse's memory, tending his grave and her grief with steady devotion. Their three very different versions of mourning gave space to wonder about our own actual and imagined dealings with death.

Into this triage of choice enters, Sam, played by Sil Zinicola, the neighborhood butcher and widower they meet in the graveyard. His growing interest in Ida makes Lucille jealous and Doris disapproving. He threatens their will-worn patterns enough for Lucille and Doris to intervene and separate the couple. Their manipulation is exposed before and after their friend Selma's wedding to which Sam brings the lively and talkative widow Mildred, played by Pat Boggs. The three friends, loosened by wine and dancing, reveal their separate truths, till then unspoken, and make us wonder together what "enough" is and dare to hope for "more." The evening crescendos into catharsis and the three women stagger off to bed, exhausted by revelations.

The next morning's hangover scene is hysterical until Ida discovers Doris has died in the night. We plunge with them into present grief, rippling in us new combinations of feelings. Sam and Ida reunite and, with Lucille, make a final visit to the cemetery. There Lucille fusses over her friend's grave as she used to disapprove of Doris's fussing over her late husband's. And finally she is able to tell Doris to say goodbye to her own philandering husband.

The ending is intensely satisfying.

Friendship, marriage, love, death. As I rose from my seat to join the audience in thunderous applause, I turned to see a roomful of misty eyes and warm expressions. We had formed a club too, though not of cemeteries. We were one—bigger somehow and more open of heart.

As I looked back up on stage at the behind-the-scenes crew, I realized it hadn't been a small cast after all. The producer Jane Becker was there, and the stage manager, Goldie Grandy, and Denny Cumber and Nan Hepp, the property mistresses. And Pat Dews had worked her costume magic again and Sandy Iasiello, the make-up. And Dot Schuetze had doubled as assistant to the director and understudy. And Dave Milbradt, Bill Whyte and Rick Sullivan from the HHLSTV Crew had handled sound and lighting; Lynn Levvis, choreography; Alan Mager, set design; Ted Day and Alan Mager, set construction; Lucy Modrak and Grace and Ed Baier, set painting; and Joey Wagner, set decoration. Karen Naylor lent her coffee table. Bets and Goldie did program and publicity; Ed Knepley was the photographer and Elena Portoles and Carol Katchmark were in charge of tickets. The beautiful dinner music was pianist Jack Merelman's and those NY accents were so authentic thanks to Sylvia Waldman. The set-up and tear-down crew consisted of Alan Mager, Goldie Grandy, Sandy Mills, Jim Burwell, Sil Zinicola, Rick Sullivan, Ted Day, Art Moscatello, Jack Merelman, Helen Esposito, Denny Cumber and Bob Rewald. Wow, it sure does take that proverbial village to produce a show as fine as this.

Bets picked a strong script with realistic dialog, great lines and well-developed characters. But it took the actors and crew to pull together this bitter-sweet, urbane comedy into a life-affirming evening of large laughs and small tears. And all of it right here in the Heritage Hunt Club, not a "Cemetery Club" for sure.