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REVIEW: "Miracle on South Division Street"

Williamston Theatre

Williamston welcomes the holidays with heartwarming comedy

By Bridgette M. Redman

Posted: Dec. 6, 2014 at 2:35 p.m.

Every family has its secrets – some more than others.

"Miracle on South Division Street," now playing at Williamston Theater, reminds one a little of "Other Dessert Cities," only it has more charm, personality and gentleness to it. In both stories, the daughter is a writer who is about to reveal family secrets to the public. However, in "Miracle on South Division Street," it is the daughter who knows things the rest of the family does not.

Tom Dudzik's 90-minute play is about families and the stories that bind them together. In this comedy, the story has to do with a 17-foot tall statue of the Virgin Mary that was built in the 1940s after the patriarch of the family said she appeared to him in the barbershop on Christmas Eve. Ruth, the middle daughter, has called a family meeting with her mother, Clara, her younger brother, Jimmy, and her older sister Beverly.

Ruth, played by Emily Sutton-Smith, is filled with nervous energy about the upcoming meeting and what she plans to share. It is clear she loves her family, and equally clear she doesn't expect things to go well. Sutton-Smith has a beautiful presence about her, and she telegraphs much in the way she talks, the looks she gives and the way she moves. She handles the role with a gentleness, keeping it free of unnecessary anger and letting her choices move the play in the direction of heartwarming love rather than any hint of cynicism.

Ruth Crawford is delightful as Clara, the mother. She fills the stage from the time she walks on and hits her lines with an exquisite comic timing, tossing out humorous lines with an authenticity that never mugs. She's graceful while being larger-than-life, and gives an empathetic performance that brings the audience right along with her every emotion. She also finds something that connects her to each of her children, and it is easy to see from where they draw their very different personalities.

Wendy Hedstrom's Beverly comes late into the scene, and she makes it clear that this is not a comedy of manners or an English drawing-room. She's a Buffalo gal eager to get to the bowling alley and chug some beers before midnight mass. She is loud and brash, and Hedstrom plays those notes for all their worth, letting Beverly upset the apple carts and keep everyone from getting comfortable. She is most closely allied with Clara, and the two play off the younger siblings in a way that keeps the stakes high throughout this comedy.

Tony Sump has the challenging task of being the only man on the stage in a household of strong women. His character, Jimmy, is more laid-back and often has the role of straight man, feeding lines and situations and being the support his sister Ruth needs.

Under Rob Roznowski's direction, the zingers fly and the players are in constant motion, slowing only for the more poignant moments, where the contrast in movement makes things even stronger. Roznowski finds the heart of this story, highlighting both the love and difficulties that families have with each other. He makes sure that this is a heartwarming holiday story and not a cynical sit-com.

Bartley H. Bauer's set design works hand in hand with Michelle Raymond's props design, creating a kitchen whose open space makes it look big, while every cubbyhole is filled with items that make the house feel lived in. The family has been living there for decades, and it shows. Equally impressive is the statue of the miraculous lady, a tall, imposing figure behind a glass case, decorated for Christmas with flowers and lights.

"Miracle on South Division Street" is filled with personality, populated with a family of likeable people who are doing their best to believe in the miracles of life.

SHOW DETAILS: 'Miracle on South Division Street'

Williamston Theatre
 122 S. Putnam Road, Williamston
 8 p.m. Thursday, Dec. 11, 18
 8 p.m. Friday, Dec. 12, 19, 26
 3 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 6, 13, 20, 27
 8 p.m. Saturday, Dec. 6, 13, 20, 27
 2 p.m. Sunday, Dec. 7, 14, 21, 28
 1 hour, 28 minutes; no intermission
 \$15-35
 517-655-SHOW
www.williamstontheatre.org

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