

ENCORE MICHIGAN

Summer Circle show plays with the theatricality of storytelling

REVIEW June 16, 2016 Bridgette Redman

A play within a play is a convention almost as old as theater itself. It speaks to how we tell stories and even how we tell stories about stories.

The Groundling at Summer Circle is all about the play and its biggest appeal will be to theater people who will get all the jargon and laugh at the gentle mocking playwright Marc Palmieri does of the medium.

Directed by Rob Roznowski, *The Groundling* examines how theater speaks to individuals and helps them to understand their relationships and how things play out in their own lives. But it takes awhile to get to that spot. This is a play that goes a long way before it gets to the point, saving its purpose for the final few minutes.

Along the way, you just have to sit back and enjoy the journey, trusting that there will eventually be a payoff.

And if you're a theater lover, and especially a Shakespeare aficionado, the play has plenty of fan service. How many plays are written that give extra credit to audience members who are familiar with Shakespeare's "Love's Labor Lost" and its final twists and turns? Not that you have to know it going in. The in-play director, Dodd, played by Curran Jacobs, will explain everything you need to know.

Jacobs is intense in giving Dodd a commitment to the work and a sincerity in what he's doing. He takes it seriously even if he is just in a Long Island garage and not on a New York City stage. He's often oblivious to the human impact of theater and runs like a freight train through conversations, gleefully explaining the theatricality of the moment.

The play launches with Matt Greenbaum as Bob Malone and Karen Vance as Karen Malone. The two are bickering over stupid things—the expression Karen made at the breakfast table. They go at each other with practiced venom. Vance has an angry energy that makes her prickly throughout the show. It makes her moments of vulnerability especially effective. She creates a character who is guarded, eager to lash out and cynical.

Meanwhile, Greenbaum's Bob Malone is obsessed with his work, the play he is writing in rhyming couplets that tells the story of his courtship of Karen and how blissfully happy it was. Greenbaum chose to be most frequently looking at his papers in hand, purposely creating a disconnect with other characters. It set him apart from the others and established that he was struggling with some cerebral issue that he was as yet unable to reveal. It added a layer to character, a man who might otherwise be seen as somewhat simple and shallow.

Derek Bry and Rosie Sullivan play the brother and sister team of Pete and Ally. They make a nice foil to Bob and Karen, two siblings who rib each other and give each other a hard time, but who ultimately have a solid bond between them that is palpable on stage. Both of them bring humor to their roles. It is especially enjoyable to watch Bry spit out the couplets in an awkward manner, skillfully showing what bad acting would look like from a self-professed amateur. Meanwhile, Sullivan has several amusing moments where her character portrayals take off in a rapper-like direction.

Mykayla Smith plays Victoria, the only professional actor on the stage. She's brought in to perform the lead role and bring some professionalism to the production. However, Smith's portrayal lacks energy and is flat compared to the other actors performing around her. She doesn't show the charisma that would make both Dodd and Pete chase after her the way that they do.

A guest performer and the only non-student in the production, Michael Hays was amusing as the hard-of-hearing father who is helping out with the show as both actor and technical director. He manages to be oblivious to much of what is going on around him while still having a presence that makes the part work.

Hernando Claros creates a detailed set with multiple tools hanging on the garage wall. It helps set the scene and is especially impressive considering it must be moved on and off quickly for the Friday and Saturday performances when there are shows both before and after the main stage attraction.

The Groundling has many clever bits and some definite intellectual appeal. Roznowski stages it well and milks it for all of its cleverness. His actors put in mostly solid performances and commit to the roles they are given. For a free night of theater, it's worth the trip to campus, even if it will not be one of the more memorable shows Summer Circle has ever staged.

Time: 8 p.m. to 9:55 p.m. with 15 minute intermission.

[Click here for show days, times and details.](#)

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