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NEW MONITOR

REVIEW: "The Understudy"

Williamston Theatre
From the New Monitor

A look at the backside of theater

By Daniel Skora

"The Understudy," the current offering of the Williamston Theatre, takes a look behind the scenes of a Broadway drama through three characters intimately involved in its production.

They include Jake (Drew Parker), a movie star and action hero who views the legitimate stage as the vehicle which will bestow upon him the mark of a serious actor. Jake is the understudy for Bruce, a movie star whose box office draw is bigger than Jake's. Bruce is the lead actor and though he is often referred to, he

never actually appears in the show.

Roxanne (Michelle Held) is the stage manager in charge of conducting rehearsals for the understudies. Since there's some serious money invested in this show, even the understudy has an understudy. That's Harry (played by Williamston Artistic Director Tony Caselli, donning his acting shoes just to keep in shape), an actor with principles who's in the show only because he knows somebody who knows somebody else who knows the hairdresser for Bruce.

Friction develops immediately between the three. Jake believes that he should be the star of the show and can't understand why someone so unlike him has been cast as his understudy. Harry considers himself to be more talented than actors in action films and makes no pretense at hiding his feelings.

Roxanne has personal reasons to feel distressed. Six years ago, without explanation, Harry walked out of her life a few weeks before they were to be married. Roxanne has neither seen nor spoken to him since, and his presence makes for some awkward moments during the rehearsal.

"The Understudy" is a biting comedy with enough intellectual energy to overcome the few issues it has with credibility. For one, it takes a fascinating look at the practicalities of what's required to put on a high-stakes Broadway show. Big money, star power and box office success seem to trump creativity and substance every time. For another, the human relationships with which it's concerned are complex, an intelligent tangle of artistic integrity and emotional involvement.

The literarily inclined will enjoy the fact that Franz Kafka plays a significant part in the play. The show that the three characters are rehearsing is based on an undiscovered Kafka play (digest that thought for a moment) the storyline of which sounds a lot like Kafka's two unfinished masterworks, "The Castle" and "The Trial."

Under Rob Roznowski's direction, the show achieves a nice balance between comedy and seriousness. Set design by Bartley Bauer is a canvas backdrop that pictures the empty interior of a theater. The lighting, by Alex Gay, must be bad in order to be good because it's being controlled by an unseen character on the light boards named Laura. Laura is either sleep deprived or steeped with intoxicants, and her erratic and untimely cues add a significant amount of humor to the production.

"The Understudy" ends with a scene that suggests that art has at its core a purity of motive that elevates it above the need for any of the traditional requirements associated with public exhibition. Economics, notoriety, even the need for an audience take a back seat to the simple pleasures to be gotten from the creation of something which has no practical purpose but to provide joy and vitality to the soul of its creator.

This play is an interesting blend of comedy and drama that takes a welcome look at the backside of theater. It also features some memorable performances of actors playing actors that you won't soon forget.

SHOW DETAILS: "The Understudy" is by playwright and author Theresa Rebeck. The show runs through June 17. Tickets are available by calling the box office at 517-655-7469. Further information is available online at www.williamstontheatre.org. The Williamston Theatre is located at 122 S. Putnam in downtown Williamston, about ten miles east of Lansing.

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Performance Information

Show times

Thursday, May 17, 2012 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, May 18, 2012 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, May 20, 2012 at 2:00 pm
 Thursday, May 24, 2012 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, May 25, 2012 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, May 26, 2012 at 3:00 pm
 Saturday, May 26, 2012 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, May 27, 2012 at 2:00 pm
 Thursday, May 31, 2012 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, June 1, 2012 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, June 2, 2012 at 3:00 pm
 Saturday, June 2, 2012 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, June 3, 2012 at 2:00 pm
 Thursday, June 7, 2012 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, June 8, 2012 at 8:00 pm



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Friday, June 15, 2012 at 8:00 pm
Saturday, June 16, 2012 at 8:00 pm
Sunday, June 17, 2012 at 2:00 pm



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