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REVIEW: "Miracle on South Division Street"

Williamston Theatre

Miracle in Williamston

By Daniel Skora

Posted: Dec. 11, 2014 at 5:33 p.m.

You expect miracles to happen on Christmas Eve. Our literature and traditions are filled with stories about wondrous, magical happenings that occur the day before the most anticipated holiday of the year. But for a miracle to unravel, nay, to become totally undone on Christmas Eve, why that's just unheard of. Unheard of, that is, until the story of what took place a few years back on South Division Street became

known.

"Miracle on South Division Street" is the current presentation of the Williamston Theatre, and it's a good one. For those who look for clues that telegraph what a show might be about, the key word here is division. A miracle that happened in Buffalo, New York back in the '40s, and which has sustained the Nowak family for over 60 years, is about to challenge their faith and their unity.

What happened in this most unlikely of miracles was an appearance by the Virgin Mary to a local barber. Over the years, the place where the miracle happened has become a shrine and a destination point for tourists who come to view the 17-foot-tall commemorative statue, drop a few coins in the memorial box, and ask the Virgin for a miracle of their own. The shrine is now cared for by the barber's daughter, Clara Nowak (Ruth Crawford), who looks at her role as being as much of a religious experience as the Roman Catholic faith she's grown up with. She's always happy to talk up the shrine at her Soup Kitchen, where she serves up hearty bowls of soup "made on holy ground."

Clara's three grown children have long since outgrown the zeal for the shrine they once shared with their mother. Jimmy (Tony Sump) can no longer recite with any kind of enthusiasm the welcoming speech he's given over the years to those who come and gawk at the shrine's replica of the Virgin. Beverly (Wendy Hedstrom) is a rough-edged soul who's most comfortable with a brew in one hand and a bowling ball in the other. Ruth (Emily Sutton-Smith) aspires to the stage, and the reason she's called a special meeting of the family on this Christmas Eve is the manuscript she's written for a one-woman show dealing with the apparition.

"Division Street" is a comedy, though it would be hard to imagine a play about an appearance by the Virgin Mary and a family on the verge of crisis as not having a serious thread of drama running through it. The play is by Tom Dudzick, who has cornered the market on Polish/Catholic/Buffalo plays, not just because he's Polish and Catholic and from Buffalo, but because his plays, which tend to be variations on the same P/C/B theme, are finely crafted and well-plotted out.

The Polish/Catholic presence can be seen throughout the Nowak home, with babka in the oven, oxtails on the stove, a crucifix prominent on the wall, and midnight mass just hours away. In addition, Dudzick knows how to build a story. His set-up is colorful, informative and amusing. And when he gets into the meat of his play, he offers not one, but three climaxes, each more startling than the one before.

Beginning with a fine cast, director Rob Roznowski has put together a production that's visually rewarding and never stalls during the 90-minute no-intermission performance. Sutton-Smith and Crawford deserve special shout outs, in part because their characters are more complex and have a broader range of emotions. Set design is by Bartly H. Bauer (the Nowak kitchen bears all the markings of a place home to countless prior orchestrations of golabki and pierogi), with props by Michelle Raymond (the show features its own replica of Mary tucked up near the rafters).

"Miracle on South Division Street" is about families, their traditions, and whether personal identity should be dictated from without or defined by one's own yearnings. The show is a nice little comedic gem, and you will be enriched by the experience of stopping by the Nowak house on their momentous Christmas Eve, when the gift they receive is not so much an end to everything they have held sacred, as it is an opportunity for new beginnings.

SHOW DETAILS: 'Miracle on South Division Street' The show runs through Dec. 28. Tickets are available by calling 517-655-7469, in person at the box office Tuesday-Saturday noon-6 p.m., and online until 24 hours prior to each performance at www.williamstontheatre.org. The Williamston Theatre is located at 122 S. Putman Street in downtown Williamston, about 10 miles east of Lansing.

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Performance Information

Show times

Friday, November 28, 2014 at 3:00 pm
 Friday, November 28, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, November 29, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, November 30, 2014 at 2:00 pm
 Thursday, December 4, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, December 5, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, December 6, 2014 at 3:00 pm
 Saturday, December 6, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, December 7, 2014 at 2:00 pm
 Thursday, December 11, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, December 12, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, December 13, 2014 at 3:00 pm
 Saturday, December 13, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, December 14, 2014 at 2:00 pm
 Thursday, December 18, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Friday, December 19, 2014 at 8:00 pm

Saturday, December 20, 2014 at 3:00 pm
 Saturday, December 20, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, December 21, 2014 at 2:00 pm
 Friday, December 26, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Saturday, December 27, 2014 at 3:00 pm
 Saturday, December 27, 2014 at 8:00 pm
 Sunday, December 28, 2014 at 2:00 pm

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