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Theatre UAF's unconventional plays create captivating evening

by Scott McCrea/ Theater Review

FAIRBANKS — Theatre UAF's production of "Can Can Plays the Bay at Nice" boasts some of the finest, well-polished acting you'll find in the Golden Heat City, rivaled only by the consistently great work churned out year after year by Fairbanks Shakespeare Theater.

If you don't mind community theater that bypasses the mainstream and pushes the envelope a tad in terms of being thought provoking and different, you're in for a real treat with the talented thespians who grace the stage of the Salisbury Theatre. "Can Can Play the Bay at Nice" is a trio of one-act plays; "Can Can" (written by Romulus Linney), "Play" (by Samuel Beckett) and "The Bay at Nice" (by David Hare). As director Stephen Golux told the Fairbanks Daily News-Miner, the three plays all have very unconventional structures and are thematically similar.

"There was a way to make this a theatrical event that was about the nature of theater itself," he said. "I think that the experience of people coming to watch it will not be unlike going to a short-film festival where you are able to get a small bite sample of things. It is more about form than content."

The nature of theater itself. It's a good way to describe the trifecta offering that is "Can

Can Plays the Bay at Nice." With the exception, and only in a minor way, of "Play," none of the three acts offer any distraction, unique set design or special effects to enhance the theatrical production. We're going back to the basics baby. Put the actors on stage and let them do their magic.

"Can Can" and "Play" comprise the first half of the show, and both plays rely upon exceptionally timed dialogue to make them successful. "Can Can" is a poignant and telling tale made up of overlapping soliloquies in which an ex-GI (Chioke Buckley) recalls his brief love affair with a French girl (Grace McCarthy), while a Nashville housewife (Bindu Gadamsetty) tells of the strange bond she feels for an older country woman (Crysta Parks). Though there is no happily every after ending, the journey that the four performers take us on in "Can Can" is quite lovely, and truly captures the heartfelt sadness that is love that cannot be had.

In the case of "Play" the problem isn't necessarily love that cannot be had, it's love that was had but probably shouldn't have been had. Confused? Wait until the act begins and you are treated to three "talking heads" with ghastly painted faces, each one coming out of an urn. Just as you are trying to comprehend what it is you are seeing, the rapid fire dialogue starts, sometimes with the three performers

(Elizabeth Allen, Jenna Weisz and Brian Lyke) all talking over each other. Eventually, a story unfolds, and then, just when you think it is over, it unfolds again. It's a highly entertaining performance, marvelously executed by the three performers and with meticulously timed lighting transitions courtesy of lightboard operator Andrew Cassel.

"The Bay at Nice" rounds off the one-acts, and it is the longest and has the more conventional storyline of the three. Set in Leningrad in the late-1950s, "Nice" revolves around the relationship of an aging aesthete, Valentina Nrovka (Hadassah Nelson), with her daughter Sophia (Codi Burk). There's a lot more mixed into it, including the authentication of a Matisse painting and, similar to the other two one acts, a great deal of angst over love.

Despite these various plots in "Nice" it all circles back to the character of Valentina. That's due in large part to the powerful performance by Nelson, whose commanding stage presence dominates the production. Nelson has always been a top-rate performer, especially in the work that she has done in FST production's such as "Romeo and Juliet" and "Antigone." She's that rare local performer who doesn't necessarily have to say much to convey a message; her physical mannerisms and facial expressions say so much. That's certainly the case

with her portrayal of the angry and bitter Valentina. Also impressive in "Nice" was Pedro Lizardi as Peter, the woeful and love struck lover of Sophia. Like Nelson, a lot of his performance came through in his physical mannerisms as he slouched depressingly around the stage in Eeyore fashion.

For the theater buff, "Can Can Plays the Bay at Nice" makes for an evening well spent. You won't walk away from the shows with laughter in your heart or a song on your lips, but you will leave with a great deal of thought on your mind. Not a bad thing, if you ask me.

"Can Can Plays the Bay at Nice" runs through this weekend with performances at 8:15 p.m. Friday and Saturday with a Sunday matinee at 2 p.m. For more information call 474-7751.

Scott McCrea is a local writer who has been reviewing local theater for more than a decade.