

## **Review: 'Sylvia' an endearing trip through life of a man made dysfunctional**

Written by **Brent Hallenbeck**

You could go to the Vermont Stage production of “Sylvia” because it’s a sweet, amusing exploration of man's relationship with man, and with man's best friend. You could go because you love dogs, or because you love theater. You could go for the novelty of an actress playing the part of a dog. Or you could go because, well, how many times do you get to watch an actor scratch another actor behind the ears? In other words, “Sylvia” has a lot going for it. The play by A.R. Gurney that opened Wednesday at FlynnSpace somehow manages to be a little silly and a little ponderous at the same time, but for the most part it's an endearing trip through the life of a man made dysfunctional—or, depending upon your point of view, functional—by the arrival of a female mutt in his life.

Vermont Stage has a history with “Sylvia.” The Burlington company presented it to sold-out crowds nine years ago, with actress Kathryn Blume winning folks over in the title role (it sold out again Wednesday). Blume’s husband, Mark Nash, the artistic director at Vermont Stage, is directing her and her cast mates in this reprise, which represents Nash’s last production before he steps down from the company after the season ends this spring. The light nature of “Sylvia” and the professionalism of the four actors made this final production an easy one for Nash to lead. So “Sylvia” is not so much a swan song as it is a romping dog-and-pony show. “Sylvia” derives much of its fun from the lead character verbalizing everything people assume dogs are saying with their body language — "I love you," "When do we eat?," "I think you're God." These are the thoughts she shares with Greg (played by Stephen Bradbury), who claimed Sylvia after finding her roaming with no owner in sight in a New York City park.

Greg returns those loving thoughts to Sylvia, but his wife, Kate (Melissa Lourie), has less benevolent feelings of her own, such as when he starts playing affectionately with the dog and Kate turns up her nose and says, "I may puke, Greg." Kate, who dubs the effervescent Sylvia "Saliva," thinks a dog is the last thing an empty-nest middle-aged couple working important jobs in Manhattan needs in their lives. Sounds like Kate might be a little jealous of her husband's unconditional love for another female. A fellow dog owner (John D. Alexander) Greg meets in the park brings that uncomfortable metaphor even further when he warns Sylvia's owner that he might be getting too close to his pet, especially considering that he calls her by a female name. Is it possible Greg latched onto Sylvia to fill in for the affection that might be lacking from his marriage? That question is what lets the quirky “Sylvia” rise above being just a dog-and-pony show. And thanks to the actors in the Vermont Stage production, the message and the sense of joy both come through. A lot rides on the actress playing Sylvia, and Blume, with her characteristic unbridled ebullience, is a natural. She carries off the cuddliness Sylvia requires while demonstrating a surprising potty mouth for a pooch (what do you think dogs are saying when they bark at cats?). Bradbury, the only New York-based actor in the cast, immediately lets the audience accept that, yes, this is a man grappling with his place in the world as well as with Sylvia's place and his wife's place in his world. He does that by employing a combination of daft acceptance and tender realization that's quite effective (think Dick Van Dyke in his battle of wits with Mary Tyler Moore).

Staying on the topic of early TV actors (think Jonathan Winters and his panoply of weird characters), Alexander not only plays the nerdy dog lover in the park, but also a female friend of Kate's and the androgynous therapist who tries to sort through the inter-species love triangle. Alexander typically and expertly takes on tough-guy roles in the rugged plays of David Mamet or Martin McDonagh; it's beyond refreshing to see him go so far out of character and have such a good time doing it. Lourie is stuck with the least-savory role of the play, as the wife who comes off as a shrew, but she gives Kate enough depth to show that she's not hating the cute little pup as much as she's hating the flaws she's discovering in her marriage.

“Sylvia” does take a serious turn toward the end, but, hey, it doesn't get too heavy. This is, after all, a play about a talking dog.