

Theatre Review: "Sylvia" at Vermont Stage Company in Burlington

(04/22/11-- Connie Meng) *Sylvia* is running at Vermont Stage Company in the FlynnSpace through May 8. Resident theatre critic Connie Meng was at the opening night and has this review.

SYLVIA, written by A. R. Gurney, is a very funny play that also has some perceptive insights into both canine and human relationships. I originally reviewed it at Vermont Stage in 2002, and this production is as good as the first – if not better.

SYLVIA is the story of Kate and Greg trying to find their feet in the empty-nest stage of life. As one character says, "These are the dangerous years. The ones between the first hint of retirement and the first whiff of the nursing home." Into their lives comes Sylvia, a bouncy stray poodle/lab mix Greg has found in the park, whose disruptions eventually force Kate and Greg to re-examine their lives and their marriage. I wonder if any academic has thought to compare this play with Albee's *THE GOAT, OR WHO IS SYLVIA*. It would certainly be interesting.



Kathryn Blume as Sylvia
Photo: Lindsay Raymondjack

Jeff Modereger has designed a wonderfully flexible set with just a few pieces of furniture that can be used in multiple configurations. Also of course, with a dog, there's the obligatory couch arrangement. Black-clad Tobin Jordan and Emily Rozanski do a slick and entertaining job of dancing their way through the set changes.

Lauren Glover has designed effective lighting that helps delineate the various locations. Catherine Vigne's costumes are terrific, especially those for Sylvia and Kate, especially her final pants suit.

John D. Alexander has great fun with multiple roles; Greg's dog-loving pal Tom, Kate's Junior League friend Phyllis and Leslie, their androgynous therapist. He's a genuinely funny actor with great timing and reactions. The three roles border on caricature, but he never steps over the line. As Phyllis he has one of my favorite lines. "I think all men should be Republicans. It seems to be good for their prostate."

Melissa Lourie does a nice job as Kate. In a role that could easily become a stereotypical whiner, she remains a sympathetic character and really blossoms in the second act.

Stephen Bradbury plays Greg who, as he says, "...needs to feel more connected to living." In Act I Mr. Bradbury plays Greg pretty much on one level and the character begins to seem unreasonable and unsympathetic. In Act II we see more depth in Greg.

Now to Sylvia – Kathryn Blume is just about perfect in the role. Her energy is wonderful, as is her enthusiastic bark. She draws a clean line between Sylvia's understanding of commands and boredom with philosophy. Not only is her attack on the kitty hilarious, but also her serious scenes hold the audience in hushed attention. In the earlier production she was a puppy – now she's a dog.

Director Mark Nash in his swan song at Vermont Stage has done an excellent job of staging in the FlynnSpace's tiny playing area. His choices of pre-show and scene change music work very well, as does the touching "Every Time We Say Goodbye" trio, which I didn't remember from the earlier production.

I have one minor quibble about Kate's Shakespeare quotes. Are they meant to be private musings or direct address to the audience? They seem to fall somewhere in between. In any case Mr. Nash has found not just the humor but also the meat of the play. He'll be sorely missed.

SYLVIA provides a very entertaining evening out. As Gurney writes, "A man and his dog is a sacred relationship." On a scale of one to five, the Vermont Stage production of SYLVIA gets five ferryboats. For North Country Public Radio, I'm Connie Meng.