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'Stone' is back, leaner and meaner

By Jim Lowe Times Argus Staff

MONTPELIER – Lost Nation Theater has unleashed a leaner, meaner "Stone."

Last year, the capital city's professional theater company produced an entertaining "docu-drama-comedy" of the very dramatic history of granite in Barre. Kim Bent, Lost Nation's co-artistic director, based his script on Mari Tomasi and Roaldus Richmond's book "Men Against Granite," with period music selected and arranged by John Mowad. Although the work was a bit long and occasionally pedantic, it was very well-received by the central Vermont community.

Lost Nation, which is undergoing some financial difficulty, is hoping to capitalize on last year's success by opening its season with a "new and improved" version. And, for the most part, it has succeeded. The new version is lighter in texture and more entertaining, and has added some quite enjoyable music. And the cast is fine.

"Stone's" big success is in its storytelling – and these stories are fascinating. They begin before granite was part of Barre's culture and end mid-20th century when the industry had its first successes combating the ever-present threat of tuberculosis in the granite sheds. There is also a good deal of information about the quarrying process, given painlessly and entertainingly.

Much of this year's cast is the same as last, and that is for the good. At Thursday's preview performance, Mary Wheeler was delightful throughout, but her crusty WASP socialite and Italian widow were particularly fun. As the descendant of one of Barre's founding families, Wheeler delivered a realistic but humorous portrayal of a stuffy grande dame, but with real spunk, as she described the onslaught of European immigrants. As one of those immigrants, an Italian woman who has lost her husband to the sheds, she was witty—if a little sad—as she prepared Italian dinners for Montpelier's wealthy.

Wheeler, this time as an Irish wife, was joined by Adam Boyce as a local farmer-turned-granite worker. Boyce did the hick-Vermonters authentically—and hilariously—and Wheeler added her own unique mixture of wit and pathos. The two proved delightful together.

Bob Nuner returned as Elia Corti, the Barre granite sculptor known for three things: carving the story panels of the city's Robert Burns monument, for being shot to death by a reckless drunk, and being memorialized by a Barre statue of himself, just down Main Street from his own creation. Although Nuner's accent hardly seemed authentic—actually few did—he was convincing, and an excellent storyteller.

Another excellent returning storyteller was Mark Roberts, who took on several nationalities. Always interesting, he proved riveting as a French-Canadian quarry worker telling tales of the joys and tragedies of stone-cutting. John D. Alexander was a real chameleon, successfully playing a wide variety of characters from an early Barre mayor to an unhappy and unsuccessful insurance salesman.

Newcomer David Poirier was perfectly charming as an Italian grocer who has no interest in killing himself in the sheds. But, he was a riot and gave dimension as an out-of-work French-Canadian who has no trouble keeping busy hitting on young girls, drinking with his buddies, then going home to cook for his children and working wife.

Another newcomer, Carol Dawes replaced last year's Judy Milstein, who withdrew this year reportedly for personal reasons, as the Gypsy peddler. Where Milstein played the middle-aged woman successfully and hilariously as a comic character, Dawes played her just as successfully as a hardscrabble woman who has done her best to survive, and has been hurt a lot along the way.

The remainder of the cast did a fine job in many roles. Cora Fauser's costumes are colorful and effective. Mowad, on fiddle, guitar and mandolin, was joined by Boyce on fiddle and piano for some fine music-making.

As with any Lost Nation creation, there is enough corn for a pig roast, but this is an entertaining show.