

Vt. Stage's 'Sylvia' a welcome romp

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By Jim Lowe

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"Sylvia," A.R. Gurney's comedy about a romantic triangle between a man, his dog and his wife – no, it's really kinky – touches on some pretty serious subjects, but it's finally more fun than meaningful. Vermont Stage Company opened its 2002-2003 season at FlynnSpace last week with a production that is particularly well-cast truly enjoys that fun.

Greg, a frustrated middle-aged businessman, brings a stray dog named Sylvia home from the park with him. He is delighted with his newfound playmate – Sylvia, likewise – but wife Kate is furious. The kids have just left the nest, and she has plans for Greg and herself – and they don't include taking care of a dog.

It's not long before Greg is spending much more time with Sylvia than Kate, and than his job as well. Greg and Sylvia have great adventures discovering each other. Sylvia's time in heat is particularly interesting, as well as her philosophy on cats. She, on the other hand, doesn't understand Greg's philosophizing when there is fun to be had.

Kate and Sylvia come to do final battle when Kate is offered a fellowship in England, with a stipend to bring the husband along. The six-month quarantine on dogs in that country, of course, leaves Sylvia out. Who wins and how is a humorous and touching look at the post-children crisis in marriage.

Vermont Stage's production, directed by Stephan Golux, is fast-paced and funny, though not as funny as it could be. At Friday's performance, Kathryn Blume was delightful as Sylvia, offering all sorts of dog-like expressions as well as hilarious physical attributes. Stephen Bradbury as Greg and Betsy Jessie as Kate are particularly well-cast. And, though they both never let up intensity in a way that prevents easy humor, they were ultimately successful as foils for the comic antics of Sylvia and the three other characters.

The three other characters are all played with panache by John Alexander, two in drag – maybe? The most effective and most funny was as Kate's sophisticated and stuck-up friend Phyllis, who ends up revealing more than she plans about her own life. This was one of the most effective comic drag performances seen around here in a long time, as Alexander knows just when and how to push the humor. In short, Alexander was hilarious as Phyllis.

The other two characters weren't quite so successful. There seems to be no reason for the quirks in John's friend Tom, and Leslie the psychotherapist finally gets too intense to be funny, but they are finally quite effective.

Vermont Stage manages the in-the-round performance quite successfully, and the set design by Jeff Modereger, costumes by Jenny Fulton and lighting by Hallie Zieselman are simple and effective.

Vermont Stage's "Sylvia" is a welcome respite from these troubled times.

Sylvia

Vermont Stage Company presents a professional production of the A.R. Gurney comedy, "Sylvia," through Oct. 27, at the Flynn Center's FlynnSpace, 153 Main St. in Burlington. Performances are Wednesday-Saturday at 7:30 p.m., with 2 p.m. matinees on Saturday and Sunday. Tickets are \$25-\$17; call 863-5966 TTD/TTY, or go online to: flynncenter.org.