

April 25, 2010

Budbill Premiere Hits Home

By Jim Lowe Staff Writer - Published:

MONTPELIER — David Budbill's new drama, "A Song for My Father," has all the grittiness of reality, with added impact of the compression of theater. In short, this is powerful theater.

That was made undeniably clear on Friday at City Hall Arts Center with the opening of Lost Nation Theater's premiere production.

Budbill's somewhat autobiographical story of his relationship with his father during the latter's final years is powerful not only for its authenticity but for its universality. In this play, Frank, the father, a streetcar engineer, worked extremely hard to send son Randy, a poet, to college. Frank simultaneously resented Randy for his superior education and was proud of his son's achievements.

The story is presented as a series of memories in which Randy's long-dead mother plays a role. From the beginning, father and son bicker.

Frank doesn't believe Randy understand what it's like to do "real" work like he had to do. Randy has it easy compared to Frank who had a drunken father who beat his mother.

As the two quarrel, it becomes clear that the reason for the conflict that the two are temperamentally alike. Randy is intolerant of his father's human foibles as much as his father is of his. (We only get a glimpse of the mother's real character, when she fights with Frank over his "wandering eye.") But, as father and son scrap, their love for each other becomes obvious.

Although there are tough moments in this intense drama, there's plenty of humor. Particularly funny — and realistic — are Frank's sexual overtures to the buxom nurse in his nursing home. There's also plenty of humor as we see ourselves in this psychologically accurate drama.

Budbill is best-known as a poet, but earned a reputation with as a playwright with his tough rural Vermont tale, "Judevine," and his 2000 opera based on the same subject, "A Fleeting Animal." Save for the opera, an entirely different genre, "A Song for My Father" is Budbill's most powerful theater piece since the 1980s version of "Judevine."

Budbill, who lives in Wolcott, was partnered by veteran Montpelier director Andrew Doe in the creation of "A Song for My Father."

Conversely Budbill maintained a presence throughout Doe's direction of Lost Nation Theater's premiere production. Consequently this proved to be one of the most successful productions in the professional theater company's 22 years at City Hall Arts Center.

The production benefited from an excellent cast, beginning with a stellar performance by Bob Nuner as Frank. There wasn't a moment at Friday's performance that Nuner could be anything other than this complex man. Nuner was riveting as he took the audience through Frank's roller coaster of emotions.

John D. Alexander as Randy was a solid foil to Frank's histrionics, and delivered some pretty convincing ones of his own. The two proved a powerful team.

They were complemented by Ruth Wallman's portrayal of Randy's mother, which was nuanced and convincing within the script's scope. Wallman was also successful as Frank's second wife, Ivy, who brings out the worst in Randy. Tara Lee Downs gave real dimension to the small but important and attractive role of Betty, the nurse.

There some awkward moments in Friday's opening night, but very few. Most noticeable was actors' overuse of their hands in an "expressive" manner. It was noticed and shouldn't be.

The consistency of overall production was amazing, as well as its high quality. Donna Stafford's minimal staging was simple and effective; Jeffrey Salzberg's not-so-simple lighting (with Lost Nation's new lighting system) dramatically enhanced the production without drawing attention to itself; and Cora Fauser's costumes felt authentic right down to Ivy's shoes.

Lost Nation Theater's production of David Budbill's "A Song for my Mother" is dramatic theater at its best.



From left, Ruth (Ruth Wallman) looks on as Randy (John Alexander) and Frank (Bob Nuner) attempt to fix a lawn chair in David Budbill's "A Song for My Father." Photo by Jim Lowe