

'Dearly Beloved' sends 'em home happy

Moline Dispatch - August 21, 2008 - Julie Jensen

The Richmond Hill Players' production of "Dearly Beloved" is a real crowd-pleaser, eliciting a volley of laughs throughout its two acts. It played to a full house Friday night, and a good time was had by all.

Set in Fayro, Texas, population 3003, it's about a wedding that doesn't proceed according to plans.

The Texas accents are great, and the scenes change quickly. John VanDeWoestyne is the director, and he has put the pieces together very well.

The set is primarily the Fellowship Hall at the Tabernacle of the Lamb, with a flower shop, bedrooms, the sanctuary, and the area behind the church around the edges.

Jean Melillo designed the costumes -- everything from a bridesmaid's gown and a sexy black dress to the uniforms of a police officer and a UPS delivery man.

The mother of the bride, Frankie, is one of the Futrelle sisters. Lorrie Halsall plays the role well.

Diane Greenwood is dynamic, as usual, playing Honey Raye Futrelle, and Valeree Pieper is Twink Futrelle, who sets up the wedding reception arrangements and wants to get married herself.

Kady Patterson is seen briefly as Tina Jo Dubberly, the bride-to-be, and also plays her twin sister, Gina Jo, who is a cow-inseminator and a bridesmaid.

Stan Weimer is Dub Dubberly, father of the bride, and he is suspected of infidelity when he's only trying to do something to please his wife.

Susan Philhower gives a stunning performance as Patsy Price, the mother of the groom. She's against the union and does her best to keep it from happening. She refers to it as "a potluck wedding."

There are many jokes about the food, much of it in tupperware containers.

Carla Stevens is the seer who predicts that Twink will marry. However, Twink's gentleman friend, Wiley Hicks, played by Archie Williams, is doped up on all kinds of medications and is completely wacko.

Nicholas Waldbusser is Justin Waverly, the UPS delivery man who will act as the preacher in the ceremony and who is sweet on the bride's twin.

Larry Lord plays John Curtis Buntner, the highway patrolman who searches for the missing bride and groom, and Eugenia Giebel is Miss Geneva Musgrave, the florist and wedding planner. She's a strong character.

Diane Greenwood gets lots of laughs out of fanning herself during the hot flashes she refuses to acknowledge. While her dress covers very little, she strips to her slip to cool down.

The UPS man is given a clerical robe for the ceremony, but it's so short that it shows his shorts. He also gets a nosebleed and has to plug his nostrils.

Some of the memorable lines are, "A woman is like a tea bag. You don't know how strong she is until you put her in hot water," "I'm trying to keep my son from taking a fatal dive into that gene pool," and "That quack couldn't cure a ham."

The sisters once were a trio called the Sermonettes, and they do a reprise to entertain the wedding guests waiting for the ceremony to begin. They sing "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms" to the tune of "Danny Boy," clapping and dancing, and the sound is impressive.

The show has some surprises that I'll let you discover for yourself, and it winds up with the audience clapping with the cast to "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms."

'Beloved' takes its place in Southern pantheon

QC Times - August 20, 2008 - by David Burke

Strong-willed, offbeat, opinionated Southern women.

Small towns with far more characters mentioned than are ever in the cast.

Unique, implicitly described situations and backstories.

Plenty of comedy, with a helping of dramatic undertone and personal crisis.

"Dearly Beloved," which Richmond Hill Players opened last weekend in Geneseo, Ill., takes its place alongside "Steel Magnolias" and "Crimes of the Heart" in the funny-Southern chick-theater genre.

Instead of Louisiana ("Magnolias") or Mississippi ("Crimes"), this time we're in Fayro, Texas, population 3,000.

It's wedding day for the daughter of Frankie Dubberly (Lorrie Halsall), and her sisters, Twink (Valeree Pieper) and Honey Raye (Diane Greenwood), are there to help, whether she wants it or not.

Pieper puts her all into Twink, who plans the wedding reception as a potluck and follows a psychic's prediction that the vows will give the same idea to her ne'er-do-well boyfriend (Archie Williams).

Greenwood deliciously overacts as the elder sister, who won't admit that her complaints about the air conditioning are really hot flashes. (Greenwood uses almost all the props onstage to fan herself in just about every locale of her body.)

Halsall tries to keep a stoic exterior as the youngest sister, dealing with an uber-redneck husband (Stan Weimer), her own medical dilemma and a runaway bride (Kady Patterson).

Patterson also doubles as the bride's twin sister and bridesmaid, who's making goo-goo eyes at the UPS-deliveryman-turned-seminary student (Nicholas Waldbusser) who's recruited at the last minute to perform the ceremony.

Also shining are Eugenia Giebel as the local flower shop owner/wedding planner/town gossip, Susan Philhower as the distraught, scheming mother of the groom and Larry Lord as the local sheriff's deputy.

The 2005 script, written by Jessie Jones, Nicholas Hope and Jamie Wooten (who also wrote "Dearly Departed"), has enough current references to keep it up-to-date yet remain what is essentially a traditional comedy. The lopsided second act includes a gospel song by the three sisters (who were once a church act called the Sermonettes), which would have served nicely as a finale except for a final scene necessary to tie everything up. On the bright side, that does lead into a very rare curtain call-slash-hoedown that concludes the night.

Director John VanDeWoestyne succeeds in guiding 11 cast members through 18 scenes and a set full of cumbersome tables and chairs. He keeps a brisk pace with lightning-quick set changes and a real eye and ear for comedy.

Heck, there's even something for the nose. The need for an expansive potluck and the proximity of the stage to the Richmond Hill theater-in-the-round audience forces most of the food onstage to be real, including a roast turkey. Stop and sniff and you might even catch a whiff of bacon frying.

Richmond Hill's "Dearly Beloved" looks, sounds and even smells good.

Wedding Belles:

River Cities Reader – August 20, 2008 – by Mike Schulz

Prior to its appearance on the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's 2008 schedule, I hadn't heard of the Jessie Jones, Nicholas Hope, and Jamie Wooten comedy *Dearly Beloved*, so I was reasonably surprised when I arrived for Thursday's opening-night presentation and saw that, barring a handful of seats, the house was completely full. (Did these people know something I didn't?) I took it as a good sign, however, and there

was an even more promising one not 60 seconds after the show started, when its first line, its *very* first, earned a huge, unexpected laugh.

I'm happy to report that the signs weren't in any way misleading, as *Dearly Beloved* - a loopy Southern comedy in which a group of Texas eccentrics attempt to pull off an ill-fated "perfect" wedding - is a terrific amount of fun, filled with enjoyably broad stereotypes and unapologetically ridiculous antics. (The play is like *Steel Magnolias* if you removed the shrillness, the aggressive manipulation, and the funeral.) It's charming and funny and unfailingly likable, and while I'm not yet sure if the lion's share of praise goes to the playwrights, director John VanDeWoestyne, or Richmond Hill's cast and crew, that's all right - there's plenty to go around.

Outside of musicals, you rarely see a stage piece boasting three separate authors, and *Dearly Beloved* is a pretty good argument for the publication of more. If I were to guess the breakdown of duties here, I'd say that one playwright was probably responsible for the laughs, one for the sentiment, and the third *also* for the laughs; the show may occasionally dip into Real Emotion territory, but when a play's characters include a flower-shop-slash-bus-depot owner who moonlights as a wedding planner, and a bull-semen deliveryman training to be a priest, Real Emotion is obviously not of the utmost concern.

Frequently, the setups to *Dearly Beloved's* gags are predictable, yet the punchlines themselves rarely are (a character berates a physician by saying, "That quack couldn't cure a *ham*"), and the physical comedy, wonderfully well staged by VanDeWoestyne, is so joyously silly that you laugh at both its goofiness and its *fearlessness*. I thought the magical lighting change that accompanied Carla Stevens' tarot-card reading was especially inspired - right off the bat, the director trusts you not to take anything here all *that* seriously - but the means by which Aunt Twink (Valeree Pieper) straddled her makeshift piano bench would run it a close second, and the scene wherein another aunt, in the midst of a menopausal hot flash, climbed atop the buffet table, grabbed a cleaver, and began hacking away at a turkey nearly brought the house down.

Little surprise, considering this aunt is played by Diane Greenwood. You could hear the happy murmurs in the crowd upon this veteran Richmond Hill performer's first entrance - as you could with later appearances by Stan Weimer and Archie Williams - and Greenwood doesn't let her admirers down; her Aunt Honey Raye, a lascivious vixen in a dress that's indistinguishable from a teddy (a stellar piece of Jean Melillo costuming), is a miniature explosion of personality. And Pieper is every bit Greenwood's high-comic match, as Twink's pathologically determined attempts to secure a mate of her own - bellowing like a pissed-off Bea Arthur - are given riotous life in the actress' unpredictably bold readings. (Williams plays the object of Twink's affections, so it makes perfect sense that his Wiley remains in a babbling, blotto stupor throughout.)

At first, it seems that Lorrie Halsall's mother of the bride, Frankie, is too sane, and the actress' deliveries too measured, for *Dearly Beloved's* profoundly batty universe. Yet as the show's lunacy escalates, Halsall peppers her reserve with moments of hilariously snippy impatience, and Frankie's coolness begins to feel like a state of grace amidst so many endearing nutjobs: Weimer, exuding hapless confusion though strangled-hillbilly cadences; Eugenia Giebel, whose ball-busting wedding planner is, I think, the performer's most marvelously confident (and hysterical) Richmond Hill portrayal yet; Larry Lord, giving great Jack Webb as a just-the-facts-ma'am cop; Nicholas Waldbusser, whose brilliant deliveries seem to come from some sunny, gonzo universe all his own; Kady Patterson, whose Gina Jo is a delicately, radiantly abashed comedienne. (The double-cast performer plays the bride and her twin sister, gets two curtain calls, and deserves *both* of them.)

Richmond Hill's latest has its share of problems, most notably a second act that gets bogged down with at least two subplots too many; the play seems to reach a natural climax, when Susan Philhower's enjoyable bitch-on-wheels finally gets what's coming to her, and then continues for roughly a half hour longer. But the show's flaws are rendered nearly insignificant by the buoyant sense of playfulness on display in *Dearly Beloved*. It's a wonderful time at Richmond Hill, and from a personal perspective, a long overdue one; the last time I enjoyed myself this much at the Barn Theatre, I hadn't yet begun my Christmas shopping.

Richmond Hill show a `Cinderella' story for Halsall

Moline Dispatch – August 21, 2008 – by Claudia Loucks

Richmond Hill Players' August offering is a "Cinderella" story for cast member Lorrie Halsall of Galva.

Ms. Halsall is cast as Frankie in the southern-fried comedy, "Dearly Beloved," running through Sunday in The Barn Theater, atop Richmond Hill Park in Geneseo.

After her initial audition for the play, she was called back by director John VanDeWoestyne for a singing audition.

"I went to Geneseo and auditioned with the others who also had been called back, and then I hurried back to Galva so I could attend a rehearsal for the Galva High School musical," she said.

She was playing first violin in the pit orchestra, along with her son, Ethan Halsall on percussion and her fiance, Larry Lord, on trombone.

"John (VanDeWoestyne) said he would be calling me that evening to let me know if I would be cast, and in what part, so I had my cell phone on my music stand and got the call that I had gotten the part as 'Frankie,' to the sounds of Rodgers & Hammerstein's 'Cinderella.' What a memory that is!"

It was because she "loved" the script that Ms. Halsall chose to audition for the Richmond Hill comedy, "and because I had worked with the play's director, (John VanDeWoestyne) as a fellow actor in several plays," she said, adding that she wanted to be in a play under his direction.

The script of "Dearly Beloved" calls for a trio of actors who are able to sing a cappella three-part close harmony.

"I was hoping that my experience of singing in my church choir at Messiah Lutheran in Galva, and solos, duets and even a three-part a cappella trio there, would come in handy," she said.

"The play has a cast of colorful characters and family members," she said. "It has both some very funny moments and some bittersweet ones. I think 'Dearly Beloved' is a play that has characters and situations with which everyone can identify."

A graduate of Wethersfield High School in Kewanee, Ms. Halsall attended Black Hawk East College in Kewanee, where she is employed at Peoples National Bank, as the fed line operations administrator, secretary for the board of directors and as shareholder accounting administrator for the bank's holding company.

Her involvement in theater began with Black Hawk East Community Players, and she has been cast in six productions with the group. She said her favorite part was Rosemary in "Picnic," under the direction of the late Clyde Walter of Geneseo.

Her first experience on stage with the Richmond Hill Players was as Agnes in "Dancing at Lughnasa" in 2001. "That year I just decided to take a chance and audition for the season at Richmond Hill," she said. "I did not know what plays were being put on there or anything, but I wanted a new challenge."

Since that time, she has been in the Geneseo group's productions of "Rumors" in 2002, "Shadowlands" and "Moon Over Buffalo" in 2003 and "California Suite" in 2007.

"Community theater is such a rewarding experience in that actors, the director, and crew all are working together to bring the script to life. Especially in theater-in-the-round like we have at The Barn at Richmond Hill, where the audience can feel like they are looking in on a 'slice of life.'"



Photo: SUBMITTED

For Lorrie Halsall of Galva, getting notification of her role in "Dearly Beloved" could not have come at a better time.