

Hilarious flushing toilet the highlight of Richmond Hill's new show

Moline Dispatch - Jul7 16, 2008 - by Julie Jensen

The not very funny comedy now playing at the Richmond Hill Barn, "Any Famous Last Words?" gets its biggest laughs from the sound of an offstage toilet flushing.

Jackie Skiles, who plays Lucy Sisson, the playwright who is forced to wonder if she is stealing the lives of real people to create her characters, gives a convincing performance, however.

Her ditzzy poet friend, Sada Ing, is played by Barbara McAbee, who would be great if she weren't hard to hear when her back is turned.

The nurse played by Cara De Marlie enters and exits with a backward hop. Why? Maybe it's because of the "exciting shoes" she's so proud of.

Sister Mary Xenia, the nun, is played by Angie Keeney, and Spiro Bruska makes a brief appearance as Dr. Kister, who will perform surgery on Lucy.

Elizabeth Buzard and Bailey O'Neil are Lucy's daughters, Pam and Angie, and David Bailey plays Spence, her husband. All three of them have trouble getting along without her while she is in the hospital.

Sandy Stoltenberg is Mrs. Kronenkrantz, who has a life Lucy wants to write about, and she also stepped in Friday for Tikesha Wiggins in the role of Elena, who was the model for the main character in Lucy's hit play.

The cast is rounded out by Sandy Glass and Mary Slaughter as the operating room nurses.

The director is Joseph R. DePauw, an administrator with the Geneseo School District.

The bare-bones set is the hospital room with two beds and a couple of chairs, and costuming includes hospital gowns and Sada's exotic attire.

So what's going on here? On opening night of Lucy's latest play she is hospitalized because of a chicken bone from an enchilada that lodged in her throat. She is certain that she won't wake up from the anesthetic, and she yearns to create one last, wonderful work.

Mrs. Kronenkrantz's story of escaping a prison camp in a barrel of latrine waste captures Lucy's imagination, and she hits the keyboard hard to tell it.

Sada makes her wonder if she stole the story. It's an interesting question that you may have to answer for yourself.

'Words' wasted on bad script

QC Times – July 16, 2008 - by David Burke

There's a message deep down inside "Any Famous Last Words?" the newest offering from Geneseo's Richmond Hill Players, but I'm not quite certain about how it's packaged.

I'm sure it's supposed to spur some talking points among its audience — Is a playwright who takes the stories of another person and uses them in her own work stealing them or using her own creative license? — if they want to peel away that many layers.

The playwright in this case, Lucy Sisson (played here by Jackie Skiles), is supposed to be confronting this question while under anesthetic in the hospital to have a small chicken bone removed from her throat. (Never mind that she appears to be fully functioning and normal as can be.)

Nancy Pahl Gilseman's script is missing the big "a-ha!" moment, or at least a dream sequence, as far as I can tell anyway.

While playwright Lucy is supposed to be a creative genius with a new show debuting that night, it's the characters around her that are far more interesting — particularly newcomer Barbara McAbee as her sidekick, an eccentric poet named Sada; Cara DeMarlie as a nurse with a quirky habit of galloping backwards when she enters the hospital room (which may be out of necessity to accommodate the Richmond Hill Barn's in-the-round arrangement); and Angie Keeney as a sweet and helpful nun wearing a blouse and scarf instead of a habit.

Lucy discovers literary gold when Mrs. Kronenkrantz, an elderly immigrant woman (finely played by Sandy Stoltenberg) becomes her roommate in the hospital, dramatically telling of her escape from a war camp. She is later confronted — either in real life or her dream — by Tikesha Wiggins, whose story was lifted for Lucy's current hit play.

Not much of the humor in the script or director Joseph DePauw's execution is original. Lucy's complaints about backless hospital gowns or having to repeatedly fill a specimen cup aren't any big revelations, and Richmond Hill repeatedly uses a flushing sound effect — which stopped being humorous about the second season of "All in the Family" — for laughs. (Even the sound effects for the toilet and the sink stop abruptly.)

The only true, real humor in the show, aside from an occasional flip by McAbee's Sada, is the interaction between Lucy, her husband (David Bailey) and two daughters (Elizabeth Buzard and Bailey O'Neil). Even though Mom's in the hospital, she's still supposed to solve all of the family's day-to-day problems.

If the script had more of those moments, I'd find better things to say about "Famous Last Words."

Playwright's Play Rights

River Cities Reader – July 16, 2008 – by Mike Schulz

You know a comedy is in trouble when its most engaging scene features an elderly woman's description of her escape from a German concentration camp. You know a comedy is in serious trouble when it uses that description merely to goose its tinny excuse for a plot.

Nancy Pahl Gilsenan's *Any Famous Last Words?*, the new presentation at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre, is a comedy that keeps threatening to say something significant, particularly in regard to the respect that a writer owes her or his subjects. But the piece proves to be so confused and unfocused that it might as well not be saying anything at all. Again and again, fundamentally important questions about an author's ethics are raised only to be immediately discarded, and legitimately dramatic recitations that seem designed to shame the play's protagonist - such as its Holocaust remembrance, and a later speech by a dumpster-scavenging octogenarian - are listened to and promptly ignored. Richmond Hill's latest isn't thought-provoking so much as positively baffling.

The production finds playwright Lucy Sisson (Jackie Skiles) landing in the hospital after accidentally lodging a Cornish-hen bone in her throat. Her eccentric-poet friend, Sada (Barbara McAbee), is there to keep her company, but it's not long before this seemingly devoted pal begins hectoring Lucy for her questionable playwriting tactics: Has she, in fact, forged a theatrical career by usurping the life stories of others without their consent? And through Lucy's and Sada's conversations, and hospital encounters with a woman Lucy previously dramatized and a woman she might dramatize (both played by Sandy Stoltenberg), we get our answer: Yup.

Despite the navel-gazing, masturbatory nature of much of the dialogue - Sada is given numerous lines describing how gifted and successful our playwright-heroine is - Gilsenan's setup isn't uninteresting, which makes her inept handling of it all the more maddening. Sada chides Lucy for her responsibility to those she writes about, while Lucy counters that she's actually doing her inspirations a service. Neither, though, appears all that invested in the debate; Sara continues to stroke her friend's ego, and Lucy appears impervious to any kind of self-examination - she listens to that harrowing concentration-camp account with a bemused look of, "Hmm ... how can I pilfer this ... ?"

Any Famous Last Words? could be played for ironic dark comedy, I guess, with its heroine who steadfastly refuses to better herself. But nothing about Joseph R. DePauw's direction or Skiles' amiable performance suggests that we're meant to find Lucy anything but endearing, and Gilsenan doesn't exactly display an inventive comedic mind; her idea of a running gag is to have Lucy mutter "Damn it, Sada" more than a dozen times, and the sound of an off-stage toilet flushing really hasn't been amusing since the heyday of All in the Family. (Though several of Friday night's audience members would likely disagree). Gilsenan is the co-author of the stage versions of A Separate Peace and Ordinary People, and Any Famous Last Words? is just a little less funny than A Separate Peace and Ordinary People.

Not that its playwright doesn't try. (And boy is she trying.) But what are we to make of the supposedly comic scenes with Lucy's ineffectual family (David Bailey, Elizabeth Buzard, and Bailey O'Neil), who are so tangential that they exist merely to show that this talented, successful playwright is also a wonderful, and unappreciated, wife and mother? (Gilsenan's implied narcissism knows no bounds.) Why give Sada a saucy flirtation with a friendly doctor (the invaluable Spiro Bruskas) when the character vanishes after his first scene? What's with Lucy's nurse (Cara DeMarlie), who seems perfectly sensible, yet has been saddled with the bizarre - and bizarrely inconsistent - character tic of entering and exiting rooms backwards? (God bless DeMarlie, though; her hilarious readings of "Good girl" when collecting Lucy's urine samples are fabulously condescending.) Any Famous Last Words? appears to be a comedy only because of these random throwaways and the punctuation mark in the title; even the leading ladies' repartee is less witty than generically bitchy, and the timing isn't sharp enough for the bitchiness to generate many laughs.

Richmond Hill's latest features some nice elements. Angie Keeney, with her lovely down-turned smile, is a warm, agreeable presence as a kindly nun, and Stoltenberg delivers her Holocaust monologue with a pained, half-whispered directness that creates a deserving hush in the audience; she completely outclasses the play she's in. (Stoltenberg also earns bonus points for undertaking a second role with what I'm assuming was late notice, as the program lists an absent Tikesha Wiggins among its performers.)

Yet Any Famous Last Words? is still a bummer. At one point in Act I, Sada discusses the underwhelmed reactions to her poetry, and opines, "Even critics - especially critics - do not understand art." The line gets a laugh, and despite the awkward grammar, should get a laugh. But speaking as a critic? I may not know art, but I sure know what I don't like.

McAbee hits the Richmond Hill stage for the first time

Moline Dispatch - July 09, 2008 - by Claudia Loucks

Barbara McAbee is making her famous first words with "Famous Last Words."

A resident of Thompson, Ms. McAbee is making her Richmond Hill stage debut as "Sada Ing," in "Any Famous Last Words," staged through Sunday and July 17-20 in the Barn Theater, atop Richmond Hill Park in Geneseo.

"Sada" is described as a character who is "a very flamboyant, free spirit, who enjoys life and is a loyal friend," in the comedy written by Nancy Pahl Gilsenan. The play is directed by Joe DePauw, Geneseo.

Ms. McAbee said her interest was sparked to audition for "Any Famous Last Words" because she enjoys comedy, as well as drama and murder mysteries, she said.

She grew up in Wilmington, N.C., admitting she was very shy in her youth, limiting her theatrical career to one play when she was in second grade.

"In junior high school, I was active in sports, creative writing and science projects, but never joined the Drama Club, which was a regret of mine in later years, as the theater has become just a love of mine in my middle years," she said.

"Just like so many other teenage girls, I loved horses and dreamed of one day having my own horse," she said. "The summer between my junior and senior years in high school, I rode for two days on a bus to

reach northern Nebraska to work on the White Horse Ranch...It was a wonderful summer for a poor little gal from North Carolina.”

It was that same summer when she met the man who would become her husband 52 years later.

She described her husband, Kenneth “Babe” Woehl, as the “cutest South Dakota cowboy.”

“We just celebrated our first anniversary on June 16. It took us until the White Horse Ranch Reunion in June of 2006 to find each other again, so we had our cowboy wedding, June 16, 2007, on the ranch where we first met, and we returned to the ranch for the reunion this year and to celebrate our first anniversary.

After graduating from high school, Ms. McAbee worked for two years and bought her first horse. She continued working to pay for her pre-veterinary education at North Carolina State, Raleigh, N.C., and from the College of Veterinary Medicine, Stillwater, Okla.

Ms. McAbee has practiced veterinary medicine for the last 43 years and said, “I still love it very much.”

“In college I ‘cow-girled and rodeoed’ for four years and bought my next horse, a grey jumper, whom I fox hunted with in Charlotte, N.C.,” she said.

The theater did not become part of her life until 1978 when she went to her first audition and was cast as “Myrtle Mae” in “Harvey” with the Rappahannock Players, Flint Hill, Va.

“The bug had bitten and when we moved to Marshall, Va., I started searching for a community theater right away,” Ms. McAbee said. “I was totally hoarse when I auditioned for ‘Maria’ in ‘Twelfth Night’ for the Fauquier Community Theater, Warrenton, Va. After that I was in several plays with the group, however, my favorite role was that of ‘Natalie’ in ‘The Butler Did It’. I have always admired Susan Sarandon, so I rented every one of her movies to study the characters for that role.

“I love the theater and performing,” she said. “It is so very special to know that you are entertaining the audience and giving them something very special. It is a way of enriching others’ lives, even if you never really get to know them.”