

## Romper Room

River Cities Reader - June 13, 2010 - by Jill Walsh

Character confusion makes for an enjoyable, lighthearted comedy in Richmond Hill Barn Theatre's current summer offering, *Funny Valentines*. And though the opening-night performance had a slow and somewhat shaky start in terms of line deliveries, the actors quickly settled into their roles and let their characters' quirks shine through.

D.R. Andersen's script concerns Andy Robbins (Nathan Johnson), a children's book illustrator whose professional successes were the result of his collaborations with his now-ex-wife, Ellen Robbins (Stacy McKean Herrick). When Andy's agent, Howard Williams (Archie Williams), and television program-director, Zan Wilkinson (Kady Patterson), show up with a proposal to create a TV empire centered on "Beanie," the Robbins' popular bear character, Andy has to decide whether to take the money and run or side with his television-despising ex-wife, who's also eight months pregnant with his child. (Phew.) And that's just the groundwork, laid out in the first scene in Andy's New York bachelor apartment, before the really funny stuff happens

Director Jalayne Riewerts did well in utilizing this intimate space and making it feel claustrophobic during the later scenes, when all five characters, including Ellen's mother (Jackie Skiles), are packed onto a futon and a single, swiveling chair, and trying to politely conceal particular secrets from each other. (The scene is made even more hilarious by Zan's ill-timed wardrobe choice.) This was also the scene that best showcased the talents of the actors as a group. The comedic timing was rapid and natural and spot-on here; there were none of the awkward, unbelievable movements and behaviors - a random bout of sneezing to motivate a character toward the bathroom, for example - that punctuated a few of the transitional scenes.

In terms of the individual actors, I thought Johnson was a good fit for his character - a man who's predicted to be "six years old for the rest of [his] life." His facial expressions, particularly the open-mouthed glee he displays when excited, emitted a nice, natural quality of innocence. I didn't care as much for his - or Riewerts' - decision for him to kick his legs in the air like a child having a temper tantrum; the gesture was unnecessary considering Johnson's ability to show his "childish" side in unique, more-organic ways. (A good example of this was his hasty stapling together of his shirt, an act performed because Andy doesn't want to bother with buying new buttons.)

As the denim-jumper-clad, eight-months-pregnant ex-wife of a man with Peter Pan syndrome, McKean Herrick didn't seem to have as much fun as Patterson did portraying the sensual, lingerie-wearing singleton. (Hey, being eight months pregnant isn't usually much fun in real life, either.) But McKean Herrick did a nice job with her maternal, even-keeled character whose unexpected displays of stubbornness toward her ex-husband were charmingly handled. Patterson, however, was allowed a freer range of physical expression with her role and she used this to her advantage, especially during the scene in which she "overheats" and stands at the front door, desperately fanning her bare legs while the other females are out of the room.

Overall, I found *Funny Valentines* to be like many other G-rated, middle-caliber comedies in which characters conceal their relationships and intentions from each other and subsequently spend the play's duration figuring these things out. I don't, however, mean to say there's anything wrong with a show feeling familiar or "middle-caliber"; in fact, I think it's sometimes refreshing to be able to sit in an air-conditioned theatre and watch a show that simply strives to amuse and entertain its audience. And Richmond Hill's interpretation of *Valentines* was lively and fun to watch, a jocular romp with a character trying his best to grow up.

## **Women save the day for 'Funny Valentines.'**

Quad-City Times - June 10, 2010 - by David Burke

Playwright D.R. Andersen's "Funny Valentines" asks its audience to swallow quite a lot, from little things (a character enters, yells for someone but doesn't realize that person is standing right there) to huge suspensions of reality (a man's ex-wife shows up at his door with him unaware she's 8 1/2 months pregnant with his child).

Some audiences don't mind that - the Friday night crowd for Richmond Hill Players' version of the show laughed heartily and gave the cast a standing ovation - but for those who do, the results can be exasperating.

The man in question is children's book artist Andy Robbins, who lives in a disheveled apartment after his divorce. In the script, he's called an "eternal 6-year-old," and actor Nathan Johnson takes that to mean playing much of the dialogue with a high-pitched whine and a pout.

In the opening scene, he is opposite his agent, played by Archie Williams, and that serves mostly for expository script, with no sense of genuine conversation between the two.

Fortunately, the three women in director Jalayne Riewerts' five-member cast fare much better.

Stacy McKean Herrick plays the pregnant ex-wife and former children's book collaborator, brought together by the agent for a deal to make their character, Beany Bear, into a TV series. Herrick brings a welcome warmth to the role, quietly serving as its foundation.

Richmond Hill veteran Jackie Skiles plays her somewhat-confused mother, delivering the one-liners with precision.

And Kady Patterson, playing a TV executive ready to sign the deal and quickly enter a romantic relationship with Andy, nicely nabs the exec-turned-femme-fatale role.

"Funny Valentines" is at its best on both sides of intermission, when all of the characters are gathered in Andy's apartment for a round of karaoke and a generous dose of mistaken identities.

Andersen's script falls into the convention of TV sitcoms far too often, with not enough entrances-and-exits speed to be considered a farce. The script was written in 1980, and Riewerts and her cast do their best to try to update it with the karaoke and references to Oprah Winfrey as well as, inexplicably, the TV series "One Tree Hill."

Riewerts has proved herself a talented director and performer, and she and her cast deserve better than a 30-year-old show that can hardly be considered a classic.

## **Ex-wife returns with surprise, spite in 'Funny Valentines.'**

Dispatch-Argus - June 9, 2010 - by Julie Jensen

The Richmond Hill Players' production of "Funny Valentines" takes place in the fall and plays here in the early summer, so the comedy by Dennis Andersen is not seasonal. Directed by Jalayne Riewerts at a galloping pace, it's about Andy Robbins, a children's book author played by Nathan Johnson, who has been divorced from his wife and co-author, Ellen, played by Stacy McKean Herrick, for eight months. She comes back into his life eight months pregnant, and most of the time she is downright hostile.

Kady Patterson portrays Zan Wilkinson, the lawyer who comes to wrap up the deal on the TV contract the agent wants them to sign. She's a pretty sexy number with a yen for author Andy.

The cast is rounded out by Jackie Skiles playing Ellen's Mother, Mrs. Winslow, with great warmth.

The set is Andy's cluttered apartment in New York City, designed by the director, Ms. Riewerts.

Andy, and later Ellen, staple the front of their clothes together when there are no buttons.

Andy and Zan have some hot scenes on the floor. Zan wears a yellow plastic raincoat over slinky, black lingerie and gets heated up. When the zipper gets stuck and pulls off the coat, she's really in trouble.

Andy buys a big Kermit the Frog toy for the baby and gets himself dressed up a bit.

Noticing his sartorial improvement, Ellen says, "You are wearing cufflinks instead of paper clips."

The baby girl is born, and Ellen is still not speaking to Andy.

The first fake engagement of Zan and the agent becomes real, and all's well that ends well.

## **Jean Melillo finds great satisfaction in working behind the scenes.**

Dispatch-Argus - May 28, 2010 - by Claudia Loucks

She is stage manager for the upcoming Richmond Hill Players production of "Funny Valentines." The romantic comedy will be presented June 3-6 and from June 10-13 in the Barn Theater, atop Richmond Hill Park, Geneseo.

On Thursdays, Fridays and Saturday, doors open at 6:30 p.m. and performances begin at 7:30 p.m. Sunday matinees are at 4 p.m. with doors opening at 3 p.m. Admission for both Thursday performances is \$8 and all other shows are \$10. Reservations are recommended and can be made by calling the theater box office at (309) 944-2244 or online at [www.rhplayers.com](http://www.rhplayers.com).

Ms. Melillo, who lives in Atkinson, said the work back stage is every bit as important as what happens on stage.

"The actors should have what they need when they need it," she said. "The audience should see a seamless performance and not be aware of the crew."

Making the decision to work on the crew of a show depends more on who is directing the show, Ms. Melillo said. "If I respect and trust the director, I can be sure the experience is going to be good."

Her involvement in theater began in junior high school when she was cast as an 85-year-old woman whose favorite expression was "It's enough to exasperate a saint," she said, adding, "On stage it seems like I've always been old."

After high school, she was busy working and raising a family and admitted she never attended a play by the Richmond Hill Players.

"That might still be true if it wasn't for Clyde Walter," she said.

Mr. Walter, now deceased, is one of the founders of the Richmond Hill Players, and the man who encouraged Ms. Melillo to help with a play in 1982. He was directing a melodrama for a dinner theater production and informed Ms. Melillo he had "the perfect part."

That "perfect part" was for her to sit at the side of the stage holding prompt cards letting the audience know when to boo, hiss or cheer.

She moved to California in 1989, returning to the area in 2004, and jumped right back into theater work with the Richmond Hill Players.

Ms. Melillo estimates she has been involved in 45 plays, with the majority in working back stage.

In her on-stage roles, she has been cast in a variety of parts, from an aristocrat countess to a pregnant grandmother.

"I directed one dinner theater in 1988, 'The Creature Creeps,'" she said. "It was a funny show, but not a fun experience."

Ms. Melillo encourages area residents to get involved with community theater, on or off stage, and said, "If you don't like to memorize, there are dozens of other jobs that need done with theater. Without those 'parts,' the actors would be standing on an empty, dark stage in an empty theater."