

Spend time with Richmond Hill's excellent drama

Quad City Times – September 11, 2003 - by Ruby Nancy

Michael J. Chipiga's "Getting and Spending," the latest Richmond Hill Players production, marks the directing debut of actor Andy Davis, and the Richmond Hill debut of three well-known Quad-City area actors.

And to borrow a phrase from a beleaguered blonde, that's a good thing.

Davis began with a first-rate script, and fine performances from local talent help make this a show well worth watching. There is plenty of humor in "Getting and Spending" — and a romance, too — but this is not a romantic comedy full of fluff and convention. It centers on the interaction of a lawyer and an investment banker, but this is also no courtroom or Wall Street drama.

Instead, "Spending" is a thought-provoking play that addresses themes as important and wide-ranging as spiritual reflection and personal faith, political speech versus activism, a variety of ethical approaches and debatable definitions of personal integrity and generosity. Told in a series of fluid scenes, this show raises many issues and does so in an entertaining way.

Victoria Phillips — played with evocative and sometimes abrasive authenticity by Mary Ross — is no damsel in distress. A hard-nosed, independent investment banker facing well-documented charges of insider trading, Phillips searches out a crusading lawyer with a reputation for winning against overwhelming odds. She finds Richard O'Neill (James V. Driscoll) in spiritual retreat at a Franciscan monastery, where, after two years of self-imposed exile from the legal profession, he is a novitiate ready to take vows.

Her determination and his search for fulfillment put the two of them at odds, and the relationship that develops between the two of them is at the heart of this show. Phillips's targeting by a prosecutor with an axe to grind (Sara Veldhuizen Stealy) also raises important issues, and the many fine performances in this show will pull you in with ease.

Ross, usually cast in comedies, is in fine form here, as is the talented Driscoll. Both play flawed, complex characters who have lived through enough to see themselves and life in unsentimental ways, and both turn in wonderful work. Their arguments and intense interactions generate heat and incite serious reflection at the same time.

It's not a perfect show, but strong performances and a compelling story make "Getting and Spending" one of the rarest kind of play — a strong drama — you'll see this year. Don't miss it.

Fast-shifting "Getting and Spending" well-acted play

Argus/Dispatch – September 11, 2003 - by Julie Jensen

Can a hotshot mouthpiece find fulfillment in a Franciscan monastery? This is just one of the questions posed in "Getting and Spending," playing today through Sunday at the Richmond Hill Park Barn Theater in Geneseo.

Andy Davis has done a fine job of orchestrating the fast-shifting scenes in the play; the bare-bones set with its projections of leaded windows is highly effective, as is the sound of distant chanting; and the acting is excellent.

This is the story of Victoria Phillips, an investment banker headed for the slammer for insider trading, who charges into the monastery to convince Richard O'Neill, a lawyer who has left the legal scene because he is disgusted with injustice, to defend her in the suit brought by the government.

Mary Ross plays Victoria, a woman who will do anything to get what she wants. She's a Robin Hood who is convinced that robbing the rich to pay the poor is her duty, and she has siphoned off \$18 million to do just that. Ms. Ross brings a lot of intensity to the role.

James V. Driscoll is Richard O'Neill, the lawyer, and he's equally passionate in his portrayal, whether praying for guidance on his knees or arguing a case.

Ray Rogers has a double role. As Brother Thaddeus, he's bumbling and funny, and as the judge at the trial, he's authoritative and formidable.

As Thaddeus, he loses a sandal shuffling to answer the door while muttering, "I'm coming; I'm coming." He asks Victoria if he can help her, and when she says, "You'd be more helpful if you had a law degree," he responds with "Yes, yes, there is a lot of greed."

Sara Veldhuizen Stealy is Elizabeth Panelli, the prosecuting attorney. She is self-righteously confident that she has the case sewed up.

Greg Bouljon gives the role of Brother Alfred lots of charm. He delights in revisiting the worldly world and in his success at playing the stock market with make-believe money.

Michael Skiles is Victoria's platonic friend, although he wishes their relationship were hotter. He does his best to take care of her in this situation, including tackling Brother Alfred to keep him from foiling her plans.

Victoria's mother, Mary Phillips, is played by Jackie Skiles. She has been involved in the insider trading but has been granted immunity in return for testifying against her daughter. She walks the line skillfully.

Victoria has no luck in contacting the lawyer until she begins a striptease in the monastery and threatens to run naked up and down every corridor in the place.

When they finally meet, he tells her, "I became a lawyer because injustice made me angry, and I stopped being one for the same reason."

She tells him she spent her ill-gotten gains constructing housing for the homeless, but he doesn't budge. It's Brother Alfred who convinces him that Victoria needs him, and he should use his God-given gift in her behalf.

Things are still tense between them, and when she says, "Sometimes I wish I had gone to law school," he says, "So do I. There are some judges I would like to set you loose on."

Is the monastery the answer for him? He says it gives him time to think. "Everything I did before was ego. To find your life, you have to lose it."

He's not quite ready for some of the deprivations of monastery life, however--like the monks sitting at meals with their feet 6 inches off the floor to cause them pain so they can't enjoy their food.

Just when Victoria is about to give up on him and leave, he stops her and reaches for the paperwork on her case.

Sparks fly between them that lead to a kiss interrupted by Brother Alfred. Victoria's mother's response to that development is, "I am a happy woman. My daughter is in love with a cloistered monk.

"Men don't know what they want. They need us to give them that information. Go after him."

The case is tried--dramatically. Afterwards, they must reach a verdict on where their relationship is going, and they do. Depending on which outcome you're rooting for, there's a happy ending.