

Sister Act

River Cities Reader - April 19, 2010 - by Thom White

Saturday night's performance of *Marvin's Room* marks the first time I'd seen a Richmond Hill Players production. When previously invited to see one of their shows, I cited reasons not to attend, mostly balking at the seemingly long drive out to Geneseo. I spent much of Saturday's intermission chastising myself for not making the shorter-than-expected trip sooner.

Writer Scott McPherson's *Marvin's Room* is a play about our need to take care of one another, particularly in illness. Bessie (Jackie Madunic) lives with and attends to her bedridden, elderly father, Marvin (a character we never actually see in the play), and her fragile Aunt Ruth (Sandy Stoltenberg). After being diagnosed with leukemia, Bessie turns to her estranged sister, Lee (Angela Rathman), hoping one of Lee's sons - Hank (Jordan Lipes) and Charlie (Jared Lipes) - are a match for a bone-marrow transplant. Their reunion also provides the chance for Lee to reconcile with Hank, recently confined to a mental institution after burning down their house.

In her director's notes, Jennifer Kingry writes that she's wanted to stage *Marvin's Room* in the Quad Cities for more than a decade, after first seeing the 1996 film version of the play. Now, the Richmond Hill Players have given her the chance to present this story that hits so close to home for Kingry, who says she missed seeing the play in its heyday (following its 1991 off-Broadway premiere) while dealing with family illness herself. And the barn atop the bluff's theatre-in-the-round seems an ideal setting for the show, as Kingry incorporates three of the theatre's corner aisles into the set - each designed as a room adjoining the main stage - and consequently expands the stage beyond its traditional borders.

Madunic tones down her usual on-stage exuberance for her subtle take on Bessie, a humble, cheerful woman not interested in stealing the spotlight. (In truth, I've yet to be *unimpressed* by a Madunic performance.) With her stage confidence helping to create a strong yet conflicted mother who's uncertain of the choices she's making in raising Hank, it's easy to see why Rathman has been a regular at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre for 18 years. Jordan Lipes, meanwhile, could easily have 18 years with Richmond Hill ahead of him, given his performance as Hank. His brooding, angry resentment of his mother is well-played, but his scenes with Madunic - portraying a broken young man yearning to connect with *someone* - are the production's most touching.

Marvin's Room marks the stage debut of Jordan's younger brother, Jared, who is refreshingly unassuming, lacking the cute-but-forced qualities of many debuting young actors. Stoltenberg's Aunt Ruth delivers the perfect amount of lovable absentmindedness, while Faith Adams' nursing-home director has so much Southern charm that it sticks with you well beyond her single scene. Bill Hudson bumbles just enough as the seemingly unqualified Dr. Wally, with Tamara Ritt offering a simple, serious performance as Dr. Charlotte that turns seriously *funny* with the single drag of a cigarette. And while Eric Noyd's Bob is overdone, at least it makes sense when his dim-witted character talks about the joys of taking lithium.

While enjoying the quality of Jean Melillo's costumes and Kingry's lights, there were a few glitches during Saturday night's performance; in the most obvious one, a technical malfunction caused someone to literally yell "Ring, ring!" from backstage the first time Dr. Wally received a call. (Thankfully, the phone actually *did* ring the next time someone phoned the doctor.) The performances were also not without glitches, with a majority of the actors stumbling over at least a line or two.

All in all, though, Richmond Hill Players' *Marvin's Room* is quite enjoyable. The performers' interpretation of the script is just touching enough to move you, but without leaving you with an overwhelming sadness. It also guarantees I'll be back to catch future productions, having been impressed by this one.

Madunic, Rathman are highlights of 'Marvin's Room'

Quad-City Times - April 20, 2010 - by David Burke

The best part about the Richmond Hill Players' excellent "Marvin's Room" is that it reminds us just how great Jackie Madunic and Angela Rathman are as actresses.

Both Madunic (last seen in Harrison Hilltop Theatre's "Long Day's Journey Into Night" during August) and Rathman (absent since Richmond Hill's "Last Mass at St. Casimir's" in June) bring such a natural quality to their performances as sisters that an audience can't help but be absorbed in their performances.

Madunic's Bessie is the dutiful caretaker of her stroke-fallen father — the title character, never seen and heard only in grunts and groans backstage — and an off-kilter aunt (played by Sandy Stoltenberg). From the first scene, we learn from her absent-minded doctor (Bill Hudson) that Bessie has leukemia and needs a bone marrow transplant from a relative.

Enter Rathman's Lee, coming to Florida from Ohio with her two sons (real-life brothers Jordan and Jared Lipes) in tow. Hank, the elder brother, is a juvenile criminal and has been spending time in the "looney bin." (Scott McPherson's script was introduced 20 years ago, a less politically correct time.)

Bessie and Hank, the nephew she'd never met, bond in some of the most effective scenes in the play, and Madunic's interaction with Rathman is golden as well — the stage equivalent to watching a great tennis match. They appear to be more in conversation during their scenes together than reading lines from a script.

Director Jennifer Kingry, who herself moved back to the area to care for aging parents, nicely cultivates both McPherson's script and its subtext. It gives a generation of us going through similar experiences something to empathize with and laugh about.

Like "Rent," currently in the middle of its run at Harrison Hilltop, "Marvin's Room" deals with the subject of death with an occasional laugh-so-you-won't-cry surface.

Both are celebrations of life while in the face of death and dying. "Marvin's Room" may not be as much of a household name (it was a 1996 movie with Meryl Streep, Diane Keaton and a young Leonardo DiCaprio), but it deserves your attention.

'Marvin's Room' reflects illness and laughter

Dispatch-Argus - April 21, 2010 - by Julie Jensen

In "Marvin's Room" by Scott McPherson, now playing at the Richmond Hill Barn in Geneseo, we never meet Marvin, and we never get into his room.

We do, however, see flashing lights from inside his room at one corner of the set and hear his quavering voice from time to time.

During his slow dying, we meet his daughter Bessie, played by Jackie Madunic with a great deal of emotion, and another daughter, Lee, portrayed by Angela Rathman with her usual panache.

Then there's Aunt Ruth, played by Sandy Stoltenberg, who has her own ailments. She shrieks when she is hugged because it pushes the button that eases her back pain and also raises the garage door.

Two young brothers, Jordan and Jared Lipes, are impressive as the sons of Lee.

The cast is rounded out by Bill Hudson, who plays the questionably competent Dr. Wally; Tamara Ritt, who is Dr. Charlotte, a psychiatrist; Eric Noyd as Bob, the doctor's brother who serves as his receptionist; and Faith Adams, who plays a nursing-home director.

Bessie has leukemia, which she must battle while caring for her father. She and her sister Lee have not been close, but they rediscover each other when Lee comes to see their father.

Serious illness is rampant, but the two acts produce plenty of laughs.

A single set serves as Bessie's home, the doctor's exam room, a hospital room, Bessie's backyard, a Florida nursing home and Disney World. Bessie's kitchen is the most detailed part of the set. One whole side of the theater is cordoned off for reasons that are unclear.

Director Jennifer Kingry had a special feeling for this play because she has been caught up in her own family health drama, she said, and the story's unique tone, its mingling of dark humor and deep feeling, captures the characters' very human failings with warmth and compassion and honors their strengths without resorting to sentimentality.

Richmond Hill play features a brother act

Dispatch-Argus - April 07, 2010 - by Claudia Loucks

Jordan and Jared Lipes say that, despite years of experience, playing brothers in the upcoming Richmond Hill Players production of "Marvin's Room" will be a challenge.

Jordan is Hank and Jared is Charlie in the Scott McPherson comedy/drama, which opens April 15 in the Barn Theater atop Richmond Hill Park, Geneseo.

Since its New York debut in 1991, the play has won universal acclaim for its refreshing take on the power of love, the meaning of family, and the value of caring during the deepest struggles of life, according to director Jennifer Kingry of Geneseo.

The brothers say their characters are different from their real-life personas. Jordan, a junior at Geneseo High School, describes Hank as a "very rebellious and standoffish kid."

"I've never played a character as mean as Hank, and it has been a challenge to channel my 'meaner' side. Hank does have a soft side that tends to come out on rare occasions, yet he is always afraid to show that part of himself because of the lack of a male figure in his life."

His brother Jared, an eighth-grader at Geneseo Middle School, is Charlie, whom he describes as "well-mannered and quiet."

"I am not quiet, but more outgoing, and I like to be with friends and family," he said, adding that "it is fun" being involved in a play with his brother.

Jordan said "Marvin's Room" is filled with many life experiences to which the audience can easily relate. "Adolescent rebellion, family separation and some surprising humor will keep the audience intrigued in this story."

The brothers never intended to audition for the Richmond Hill show, but a friend who also is cast in the play encouraged Jordan to try out.

"Angela Rathman encouraged me to come in and do a reading, and since I've never played a character like Hank, I was completely hooked and excited," he said.

It was Jordan who encouraged his younger brother to try out.

"My brother and I went together to try out for the play, with no experience on my part and Jordan with a lot of experience," Jared said. "Jordan gave me some pointers, and he helps me through all of the play practices."

While "Marvin's Room" is a first for Jared, Jordan has previous experience on stage. He was Prince Chulalongkorn in the Quad City Music Guild production of "The King and I" and has landed the part of Sonny in Music Guild's "Grease," scheduled for July. Previous appearances with the Richmond Hill Players include Ralph Herdman in "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever" in 2006. He also has helped backstage with two Richmond Hill productions.

"I plan to pursue acting as a career, and I want to major in musical theater in college," he said. "I have yet to decide what school I would like to attend, simply because there are so many with such good qualities."

The brothers agreed that they enjoy being someone else on stage.

"You can give your character whatever personality you choose, as long as it stays close with the script," Jordan said. "It is fun to be able to bring life to the words on the page."

"Not many people have the confidence to memorize a script and build a character in a matter of six or seven weeks, and then perform it for an audience. I take pride in being able to do that, and I have always enjoyed the outcome."