

You'll Never Think of Barbie Dolls the Same Way

Judith van Praag

His day job at Elliott Bay Books allows David Hsieh, the founder and director of one of our favorite fringe theater company's "ReAct" to stay on top of what's published in the theater world. This is how he first laid his hands on the wacky comedy "Wonder of the World" by Pulitzer Prize winner David Lindsay-Abaire.

"We included the play in our 2003 Staged Play Reading Series and had a lot of fun with it," Hsieh said.

He worked on being able to produce the play ever since. Originally the play was slated to be part of ReAct's "2004 Season Spectacle", but due to budgetary cutbacks that year it was put on the backburner until this year's season's theme "Great Escapes".

Finding the right actors was not without a challenge, what with conflicting schedules of actors Hsieh had envisioned in certain roles.

"The gal I'd originally cast as Cass had moved to Chicago, but was going to be back in Seattle this summer to plan her wedding, but those plans got delayed, so I had to replace her... The gal I replaced her with found out she was pregnant and bowed out. Fortunately, Gigi [Jhohng], who's taking a break from school, was willing to step in at the last moment."

No small feat for the leading lady role of Cass, considering that comedy is hard, "harder than drama," as Hsieh states. "Just from knowing them, I'd say all of the cast would prefer a good meaty drama."

After jumping some hurdles, Hsieh eventually gathered a diverse group of actors with sensitive funny bones. Together, Hsieh's troupe portrays Lindsay-Abaire's odd cast of characters—each and every one of them tackling life's big questions—with a magnified, in some case deadpan sense of humor.

A dramatic discovery in her husband's sweater drawer drives Cass (Gigi Jhong) to embark on the adventure of her lifetime: a bus trip to the Niagara Falls. Along the way she befriends Lois (Ellen Dessler), a rambunctious drunk threatening suicide. Thrown together by fate, the women encounter others, who've been hit hard by life as well, each and every one of them coping with major setbacks in an extraordinary, often hilarious way.

Life's coincidences, its twists and turns, become hysterically funny when touched by Lindsay-Abaire's magic wand, and when performed by actors with feeling for the comedic beat. The playwright's work is in good hands; well timed, the participants don't miss a beat, and if they do, it's on purpose.

Dessler, whose character could be pathetic, manages to remain funny, even endearing, in her unhappiness. In the end it is she

who allows Gigi Jhong's Cass to finally open her eyes to the true wonders of the world. Kerry Christianson has a box full of tricks, or a lot up her sleeve; she appears as a tourist, as a deadpan helicopter pilot, as a clown cum counselor, and hustles on the side as a couple of waitresses. Walayn Sharples and James B. Winkler portray a couple of chameleon clowns, even without the wig, the shoes or the noses. Zachariah Robinson as Kip has his moment when he admits to his fascination for Barbies. Richard Sloniker would have been Prince Wonderful, if only he could have stayed around a bit longer...

Costume designer Anastasia Armes clearly had fun at the Niagara, Colleen McManus' lighting sets the ever-changing mood and Justin Lockwood's sound design pulls all scenes together. Always having to work with a limited budget has made Hsieh a designer who knows how to set the stage for scenes in different locations effectively with a minimum of materials.

At opening night, a patron, apparently the leader of a group of young thespians told a young man that his girlfriend should have come.

"You can always skip class for the theater," she said.

"A typical drama teacher," my companion whispered in my ear, "for her the theatre comes before anything else."

But we agreed, she may be right, after all, big lessons may be learned from a play, and sometimes inadvertently even more so WHILE you're laughing your head off.

Tip: Don't lose your ticket stub, it may win you a raffle prize, or a friend who presents the stub will receive \$2 off the ticket price.

Previously published on August 15, 2007 in the International Examiner.

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