

'Mystery Plays' well-acted but dialogue needs work



David Leach, Nat Robinson and Andrew Michael Davids star in "The Filmmaker's Mystery," Act 1 of 'The Mystery Plays' at Park Hall in Ben Lomond.

By Joanne Engelhardt, features@santacruzsentinel.com

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BEN LOMOND >> There's a lot of mystery in store for audiences seeing "The Mystery Plays" by American playwright Roberto Acuirre-Sacasa, now running through June 4 at Park Hall.

Aquirre-Sacasa, better known as a film and television writer ("Carrie," "Glee," "Big Love") as well as for stories for Marvel Comics books, created this quasi-related duo of one-act plays in 2002. While the plays themselves are interesting — not spellbinding, but at least interesting — it's really the stellar casting that keeps the evening afloat.

ADVERTISING

'The Mystery Plays'

Produced by: Mountain Community Theater

Directed by: Miguel Reyna

When: Through June 4

Where: Park Hall, 9370 Mill St., Ben Lomond

Tickets: \$20 general; \$17 senior/student; Community night (May 20), 2 for \$20

Details: 831-336-4777 or www.mctshows.org

The first play, "The Filmmaker's Mystery," is the better of the two, despite being a little vague about why or how some of the events happen. But Nat Robinson is such a strong lead actor, he carries the audience along on his strange, other-worldly journey. He's ably supported in that act by David Leach, who first delivers an ominous curtain speech as "Mister Mystery," then as the train conductor and, later, is an appropriately hard-nosed Detective Kinderman.

The third man of this trilogy is Andrew Michael Davids as Nathan West. Davids is commanding and a little menacing even when he's playing nice. West comes with a mysterious background which Nate, as Joe Manning, attempts to unravel. When so many of the people on the train Joe's taking die due to an "engine malfunction," he muses about why he, too, didn't die, and comes to accept the explanation that, "God was looking the other way."

But there are a couple of loose ends that prevent this short from being completely convincing. Karin Babbitt as Manning's assistant, seems a rather colorful but superfluous distraction with her turquoise lips and a mostly unpleasant demeanor. And when Joe arrives at the family home for Christmas, none of the Manning family characters is fleshed out enough to understand what's behind the dialogue.

But those are faults with the script. Director Miguel Reyna does his best to keep things moving, and after intermission, the audience is onto a second adventure called "Ghost Children."

This time the story features Joe's former girlfriend, Abby Gilly (Alie Mac). Gilly is traveling to see her brother, Ben (an earnest Justin Singleton), who was 17 when he killed their abuse parents and, regrettably, their younger sister as well. He has written Abby many letters, but she only responded once.

Now there's a possibility that Ben will be released (he has an appeals hearing in two months). Abby's not really sure he should be, and the audience is left to ferret out, in bits and pieces, why.

In the first half of this story, Mac just seems to be spouting her lines without really feeling what she's saying. That's why it takes awhile to understand her motives for returning to her hometown. Eventually she settles into the role, and by the time she and Ben talk, she comes to terms with her complicity in the massacre.

Scenery is minimal, yet usually quite effective (the sound of train wheels gliding over the tracks in Act 1 is a nice touch). Rather than have a character walk through a door, a simple door frame is held up, which works fine. It's also smart to have some of the scenes on a short platform below the main stage because that makes the action there seem much more immediate.

In fact, the one set fault is putting some of the scenes at the back of the stage (Joe's homecoming with his family, for example). It's much harder to hear all their words and recognize subtle facial expressions. At times there's a giant empty space smack dab in the middle of the stage, with action going on around the edges. Better to fill up that space with key plot points. (The train car at the start of Act 1 seems to work well because it is in that center spot.)

Larry Cuprys' lighting and Davis Banta's sound both work well, with the exception of when the actors are far back on the stage. Alaina Boys' costumes look authentic for the current-day action, with Davids' jacket and outfit appropriately a shade sinister in Act 1.

Although Acuirre-Sacasa didn't publish "The Mystery Plays" until 2005, it had its first production at the Kennedy Center in 2002, where it won an award for new American play. It was performed in New York in 2003. This is likely its first production in the Santa Cruz area, and although it is well acted by the Mountain Community Theater performers, the script, itself, could still use more massaging.

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