

**Theater review:**

Friday, March 29, 2013

by Scott McCrea

UAF's 'Speech and Debate' is refreshing

Theatre UAF's production of "Speech and Debate" is a breath of fresh air on the local community theater scene, a bold and innovative production backed with an engaging storyline and stellar performances. The show's playwright, Stephen Karam, mixes together serious and rather controversial social issues such as homophobia, teenage alienation and sexual predators along with an unexpected blend of campy and at times riotous humor. It's an eye-opening experience that is at times solemn, other times laugh-out-loud funny, that will leave you captivated from start to finish.

Directed by Carrie Baker, "Speech and Debate" centers on three outcast high school students in Oregon who come together in the wake of a sex scandal involving one of their teachers. There's the nerdy Solomon, an ultra-serious and ambitious reporter for the high school newspaper who is looking to break the story; Howie, the openly gay new student, who cruises gay chat rooms looking for companionship; and Diwata, a stage-struck anguished teen who expresses herself through her weekly podcast. The idea that the three of them, despite their differences, would band together is nothing new and has a bit of a John Hughes feel to it.

However, any resemblance to Hughes — or anything else — ends there. "Speech and Debate" is as original as they come and surprisingly modest given some of the direction it goes off in, in particular, the hysterical musical finale that features (among many things) a disco dancing Abraham Lincoln singing about tolerance. From there Karam jerks us back into reality, with a very powerful and heartfelt closing scene.

I can't say enough about Nicole Cowans, who delivers a firework of a performance in her role of the sassy Diwata. She owns the stage whenever she appears, with a wide range of talents that are executed with remarkable flawlessness. She can sing! She can dance! More importantly, she can act, at an oftentimes bold level that far surpasses her youth.

Sambit Misra is quite convincing in his role as Solomon, who, despite his ambitious nature, is uncomfortable in his own skin. Misra brings out Solomon's confused nature quite well, and does a great job in leading his character through his unexpected journey and change

throughout the play. As Howie, Thomas Petrie does a superb job of finding a balance between his character's confident sexual nature and need for being accepted.

Adults, or rather, the hypocrisy of adults, are an important part of the play, though adults are rarely on stage. The exception is Theatre UAF alumna Rachel Blackwell who has dual and small but effective roles as a reporter and a teacher.

The beauty of all three main performances is that none of them are caricatures, despite some rather over-the-top situations. You get the impression that these are real teenagers dealing with real issues. Just as impressive is the overall chemistry between Cowans, Misra and Petrie. Cowans is the commander here, but neither Misra and Petrie are drowned out by her during their moments on stage. It is an effective collaboration between the three. Baker deserves a great amount of credit for making all of this happen.

Working along with Baker behind the scenes are a large number of students and faculty members in efforts ranging from set design to multimedia enhancements that add a great amount to the show's overall success.

With "Speech and Drama," Theatre UAF provides the theater community with something that has been missing as of late: modern, cutting-edge theater that is exceptionally well done. It's what one would expect from a university theatrical department.

We are fortunate to live in a community where on any given weekend, there are no shortage of things to choose from. This weekend is no exception. With this being the last weekend of its run, "Speech and Debate" deserves the attention of

anyone remotely interested in the arts. The show is advertised as being PG-13 (as you can imagine from the aforementioned list of subjects it deals with) and I would strongly encourage parents of teenagers to drag them up the Hill with you this weekend to see it.

They will thank you in the end.

"Speech and Debate" runs through this weekend with performances at 7:30p.m. Friday and Saturday night. For more information, www.theatreuaf.org

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