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C-2 KALEIDOSCOPE

Emotional trek on track

Most of us cannot escape the universal question that has dogged humankind down the millennia: What is the meaning of my life? But what marks our age is the growing divide over how to pursue an answer.

On the one side stand reason and science. Evolutionary psychologists hold we are clever machines constructed haphazardly by opportunistic genes. On the other side of the divide stand religions and the perennial philosophies that argue we are spiritual beings whose destiny can be largely defined by worship.

It's a tough time to seek certainty and solace, especially when faced by emotional trial and sorrow. Such a time confronts the central character in Theatre UAF's current production "Touch."

Kyle Kalke, played by Mike Karoly, is looking at life without his high school sweetheart and wife Zoe, who was brutally raped and murdered. Helping him come to terms with his loss are his best friend Bennie Locasto, played by Charlie Pierce; his dead wife's sister, Gwendolyn P. Brazier; and a good-hearted prostitute, played by Heather Maas.

The contention between heart and head certainly figures in this drama. Kyle is an astronomer, a classic pocket-protector-wearing geek who believes in the romance of science but in a level-headed way. Zoe, we learn in Kyle's

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opening monologue, was a strong-willed free spirit who believed in astrology and other new-age notions. We hear how her spirit managed to transform Kyle and turn his gaze from the heavens to more human concerns.

However, with "Touch" contemporary playwright Toni Press-Coffman is not really interested in the divide between science and faith. Her concerns are with the tangled workings of a human life confronting horror. The play's real tension lies in wondering whether Zoe's death will send Kyle flying back to a stunted introversion.

The work calls for four actors, but in effect it is a one-person show, with a couple of assists from other characters. Kyle's monologues dwarf other dialogues and developments. This places the burden on the central figure to strike the right tone and carry the dramatic action.

Karoly's performance is nearly pitch perfect. He dominates the stage physically from the get-go, and his portrayal of a mind strug-

gling to make sense of the brutal and absurd is convincing and moving.

In fact, it is only when the other characters start intruding into Kyle's narrative that Karoly wobbles a little. While Pierce, Brazier, and Maas are fine in their roles, they cannot compete in this play's relentless drive to follow Kyle's emotional journey.

Still, this is a smart and moving piece of theater and director Thomas Riccio plays toward the work's strengths and the audience's intelligence. He guides the performers to underplaying a potentially melodramatic situation, and he keeps the stage free of unnecessary props or busy sets.

This minimalist approach keeps the focus on Kyle and his struggles, with one exception: In the theater world it's often said that a lighting director succeeds if no one notices his or her work. But in a play that talks so much about the starry heavens, lighting can't take a back seat. Again Kade Mendelowitz meets the challenge with an effective display.

With its clean narrative lines and focused intensity "Touch" acts as a lens concentrating life's lines of force onto the human heart. The play continues its run this weekend at the University of Alaska Fairbanks Salisbury Theatre.

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