



Theater review

Thursday, April 4, 2019

by Gary Black

Love and technology's death rattle ring clear in 'Dead Man's Cell Phone'

Theatre UAF's spring mainstage production is a mishmash of a show. It's part dark comedy, part drama, part netherworld adventure, all centered around that little device we spend too much time attached to — our cell phone.

Does it divide us? Does it connect us? And if it's ringing constantly — as the case here when a dead man's cell phone won't stop ringing — should we answer it?

Those are the questions playwright Sarah Ruhl subtly tries to tackle in "Dead Man's Cell Phone," the spring production at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, directed by theater professor Carrie Baker and brought to the stage by a superbly talented cast.

Jean, an awkward loner, answers a ringing phone belonging to Gordon, only to find out the reason Gordon isn't answering is he's died in the cafe in which they're both dining. Rather than leaving Gordon's cell phone with him, Jean keeps it and starts answering his calls. Upon meeting Gordon's family and nefarious cohorts, Jean spins a web of innocent tales that soon draws her into Gordon's life, loves and dislikes.

The play itself, at least its technical and theatrical components, is outstanding. The cast of five — Emily Ross as Jean, Jared Olin as Dwight, Heath Robertson as Gordon, Siri Tuttle as Mrs. Gottlieb, and Mary Conlin in a trio of roles — is commendable. Their comfort level with each other on stage is noticeable from the first ring of the phone.

Ross makes the bumbling Jean interesting, and she portrays goofy mannerisms with ease, never quite giving you eye contact while making nervous energy look easy on stage. She develops a romantic interest with Gordon's brother, Dwight, deftly played by Olin. Olin has emerged as something of a leading man in recent productions with Theatre UAF, Fairbanks Shakespeare Theatre and Fairbanks Drama Association, and it's refreshing to see him go against type here. Dwight is socially awkward, nerdy and shabby (he's used to playing second fiddle to Gordon), and Olin does it well with ill-fitting clothes and an unkempt appearance.

Heath Robertson, known to many for his frequent work with Fairbanks Drama Association, doesn't disappoint as the self-involved Gordon. He nails his monologue outlining his death, and it's worthy of the ovation it receives. Siri Tuttle as Gordon and Dwight's mother, Mrs. Gottlieb, channels some serious theater grand dame a la Ellen Burstyn or Anne Bancroft and makes every aspiring actor want to play a cold battle-axe.



From left, "Dead Man's Cell Phone" features Emily Ross as Jean, Heath Robertson as Gordon, Siri Tuttle as Mrs. Gottlieb, Mary Conlin as Hermia, and Jared Olin as Dwight. It opens Friday at the University of Alaska Fairbanks. Kade Mendelowitz Photo

The scene stealer, though, is Mary Conlin, who shines in three vastly different characters — with accents! — as Hermia, Carlotta and an unnamed stranger. She's fun, fresh and energetic, and her stage time is a delight.

The technical aspects of "Dead Man's Cell Phone" shine. Kade Mendelowitz's lighting and Andrew Cassel's sound design cleverly propel the story. Lara Lotze's stage design is a different approach than what's seen on a lot of Fairbanks stages, but it's functional, and Amanda Casterline's costuming — especially that of Carlotta, Hermia, the stranger and Mrs. Gottlieb — is funky fun and fresh. Mrs. Gottlieb's fur stole is such a character it needs its own speaking role.

Content-wise, that's where questions arise. The play is described as everything from "quirky" and "eccentric" to "dark comedy" to "drama." We know author Sarah Ruhl wants us to think about the topic — how much phone is too much phone? — but it moves a little slow at times. That's no fault of Theatre UAF, either; they upheld their part of the bargain splendidly. Perhaps in Ruhl's haste to get us, the viewer, to think critically, she overlooked the main point of social media 101: get to the point and leave the vaguebooking online.

The technical aspects of "Dead Man's Cell Phone" shine. Kade Mendelowitz's lighting and Andrew Cassel's sound design cleverly propel the story.

IF YOU GO

What: "Dead Man's Cell Phone," written by Sarah Ruhl, directed by Carrie Baker, produced by Theatre UAF

When: 7:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday through April 7.

Where: UAF Salisbury Theatre in the fine arts complex

Tickets: If purchased ahead of time at www.uaf.edu/theatrefilm, \$10 students; \$15 seniors, military and UAF faculty and staff; \$20 adults. Add \$2 more if purchased at the door before showtime.

FYI: This production should be considered rated PG-13 for strong language and mild adult themes.