



Theater review: ‘Seminar’ is all about who’s got the write stuff

There is a profound tension at the heart of “Seminar,” UAF’s Theatre and Film Department’s current production at the Salisbury Lab Theatre. This is not surprising since conflict is the bread and butter of all the dramatic arts. Usually, it lies in clashing egos pursuing their interests. And, to be sure, Theresa Rebeck’s lean and intelligent comedy is chock full of moments when characters butt heads. That is, when they aren’t sleeping with each other. But a deeper issue, like some leviathan circling beneath an agitated sea, supports the action — the question of creative integrity and self-worth.

The play presents four 20-something writers who have each ponied up \$5,000 for a 10-week seminar from a once-celebrated author. Anyone who has ever taken a writing workshop will recognize the types:

- Kate, convincingly played by Sarah Williams, is smart but insecure. Her family’s wealth has provided a top-flight education, but uncertainty stymies her work.

- Actor Kris Luddington strikes all the right notes displaying his character Douglas’ pretensions. Douglas knows the right people and slings names and literary terms around for social display.

- Charlotte Gray turns in a solid performance as Izzy, a young woman who sees writing in terms of game theory. She has no qualms about leveraging her physical charms with whomever is best positioned to advance her goals.

- Martin, played with an engaging neediness by Charles Wolgemuth, is perceptive but reluctant to expose his work to barbs from those he deems unworthy.

- And barbs a plenty fly from the acerbic mind and mouth of master writer Leonard, realized with jaded authenticity by Bruce Hanson. The aging writer magisterially dispenses unvarnished criticism, or, as he might put it, “the truth.”

What could go wrong?

But here is the thing: “Seminar” isn’t really about writers. It’s about writing, why we do it and who gets to judge the results. The play also raises questions about mentorship, questions Rebeck leaves the audience to answer.

If my references to the performers seemed cursory it is because “Seminar” is an ensemble piece: a string quintet, if you will, rather than a concerto. Every character is given a compelling voice but there are no star turns. Director Tom Robenolt has drawn from the cast strong performances that

blend together for a provocative and engaging production. He’s also capitalized on the play’s episodic structure with a brisk running time of 90 minutes. The show moves smartly, but never seems rushed.

Other production values accentuate the play’s chamber work intimacy. The majority of “Seminar” takes place in one apartment living room. For the most part, Kade Mendelowitz’s set and lighting are serviceable and perfectly proportioned to the Salisbury Lab Theatre’s modest size. The closing scene however shifts to Leonard’s apartment. The new setting is cramped, cluttered and dark. It doesn’t offer insight into Leonard’s psyche, only undermines the scene’s emotionally expansive tone. Even though she avoids answers, by the play’s end, Rebeck is too much of a writer to stint on providing some satisfying resolutions.

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From left, Sarah Williams, Charlotte Gray, Charles Wolgemuth, Kris Luddington and Bruce Hanson star in “Seminar.” Photo by Kade Mendelowitz