

Review of D-Generation by Jim Lowe

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Theater Review: Puppets share humans' dementia

By Jim Lowe, Staff Writer

Beauty, pain and humor combine to make “D-Generation: An Exaltation of Larks,” Sandglass Theater’s poignant take on dementia, a powerful experience that is at once heart-wrenching and reassuring. Surreal stories were created and lived out Friday by amazingly expressive puppets, imaginative film clips and a compelling musical score at Burlington’s FlynnSpace, illustrating the horrors and even joys of aging with this mysterious disease. Putney’s renowned puppet theater created this full-length theater piece, which was presented Thursday through Saturday at the Flynn Center, based on stories written collaboratively by people with late-stage dementia. Three puppeteers play the caregivers for five puppets, the residents of the facility. In one tale, based on a 1930s couple dancing on a ledge, the couple is at once married; one is kidnapping the other; they are about to fall off the ledge; and they are in Paris to see the “Mona Lisa” as well as go shopping. In another, in which a man on a ladder seems to be painting a cloud, imaginations again go rampant. But it’s not the stories that give this hour-long show its power, it’s the authenticity.

Perhaps the scariest moment is when the residents and their caregivers don silly “Happy Birthday” hats, underscoring the futility of it all. Conversely, the innocent joy of the residents share by living in the moment — as, for example, one old man enthusiastically telling a (not very) dirty joke. Not only do the stories of the individual elders ring true, the puppets representing them, first seeming like caricatures, become these individuals — thanks to the design and expert puppeteers. The actual stories were created by the residents of Pine Heights at Brattleboro Center for Nursing and Rehabilitation using TimeSlips, a collective creative storytelling model developed by Anne Basting, associate professor of theater at the School of the Arts, University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee.

Directed by Roberto Salomon, Eric Bass and Ines Zeller Bass, Sandglass founders and artistic directors, and Kirk Murphy operated the incredibly character-ful puppets made by Zeller Bass, Coni Richards and Jana Zeller. Eric Bass created the intriguing wheelchairs made out of crutches. Michel Moyses’s animated video underscored the surreal nature of the stories as well as the difficult inner machinations of the residents through drawing, images and painting. Paul Dedell’s score, particularly a haunting cello solo by Judith Serkin, combined styles, atonal to be unsettling, tonal to be reassuring. This was a polished production.

Sandglass Theater’s “D-Generation: An Exaltation of Larks” goes a long way in illustrating the reality of dementia in an entertaining, but moving production. Flynn Center For information about programs at Burlington’s Flynn Center for the Performing Arts, go online to www.flynncenter.org. For information about Putney’s Sandglass Theater, go online to www.sandglass.org.