

Sunday, January 7, 2007

'Happiness' has the ring of regret

Richard Dresser's world premiere at Laguna Playhouse dissects middle-class values.

By ERIC MARCHESE

Special to the Register

Unlike the current Will Smith film, Richard Dresser's "The Pursuit of Happiness" goes with the conventional spelling of "happiness" while offering an unconventional look at what is, perhaps sadly, the dysfunction of a middle-class family in Maine whose three members have each reached critical junctures in their lives.

Husband and wife Neil and Annie can each be said to count "misery" as their middle names. They've lived to see daughter Jodi apply to college, and her rebellion against this sends the family, especially Annie, into a tailspin.

Make no mistake, however: Dresser's play, a Laguna Playhouse world premiere commissioned by the theater, is a comedy.

Dark comedy isn't quite the correct term, though. Dresser's particular brand, the common thread running through his considerable repertory, could best be referred to as comedic realism. His ear for natural-sounding dialogue is uncanny, his skill at crafting retorts and replies to some of his lines even more so as he dissects the middle class' success- and consumerism-driven values.

A fine example is the show's opening, Annie's writing of the family Christmas letter, a hilarious monologue proving Dresser's facility with language.

After establishing the nuclear clan's mutual dolor, Dresser introduces two more characters: "Spud" Ketchum, Annie's former classmate at her alma mater, where she's angling for Jodi to attend, and Tucker Nugent, Neil's odd-duck colleague from the job he detests. Annie makes a desperate parlay for Jodi's future by trading on Spud's status as college admissions director, while Neil, desperate for friendship, brings Tucker home for dinner one night.

To say that Annie's and Neil's moves result in seismic changes in the family is to understate the case. "The Pursuit of Happiness" depicts the implosion of a middle-class family, as Annie, Neil and Jodi split apart.

In director Andrew Barnicle's staging, it's blatantly clear Spud and Tucker are as unhappy as Annie and Neil. Only the defiant Jodi, heartsick at the state of the world and bound to retain her idealism, seems to have a shot at something resembling fulfillment.

Barnicle's nimble staging deftly captures the nuances and dramatic undertones of the text without sacrificing any of its numerous belly laughs. He crafts a richly rewarding production loaded with memorable lines spoken by characters whose preferred weapon is pointed sarcasm.

DeeDee Rescher's Annie is genuinely a desperate housewife whose perkiness is a façade and who knows her own rampant consumerism marks her as shallow, but can't stop it. She lives to see Jodi succeed in all the ways she herself has failed, and when her plan backfires, she's caught in the grip of "existential paralysis," questioning her life's meaning.

Neil hates the dull, colorless job that has turned him into Mr. Caution ("My whole life is one giant fallback position"). He's played by Matt Reidy as a slightly dense sad sack who can manage only weak smiles. Reidy makes credible Neil's expressions of repressed anger, uncorked by Annie's actions, and his desire to reconnect with his youth's free-spiritedness.

The cynical Jodi's biggest suspicion is of the myth, ingrained in her parents, that if you work hard enough at it, you can "pursue," and achieve, "happiness." Joanna Strapp avoids outright eye-rolling at her parents' antics, choosing more subtle means to telegraph Jodi's disconnection with Annie and Neil.

Using an upper Midwestern dialect, Preston Maybank creates a broadly funny, vaguely sleazy Spud that alternates defeatism with flashes of anger. Played primarily for laughs (though given serious moments), Spud is a rollercoaster drunk who hates the word "happy" and, like Jodi, finds our so-called conventional wisdom suspect: The pursuit of happiness is "a conspiracy," he rails, and though he's drunk when stating this, he's clearly onto something.

Tim Cummings' Tucker is a shaggy hangdog with stunted social skills whose sloppy demeanor masks a wellspring of rage. Though overtly comical, his is a role laced with pathos subtly realized by Cummings.

Tom Buderwitz's set, a cutaway of the family's house, with its large, relaxed kitchen, dining area and living room, is light and airy, suiting the text's overall tone. As complementary are Julie Keen's often whimsical costumes, Paulie Jenkins' lighting and David Edwards' sound.