

“Long Day’s Journey into Night”

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By Robert Hubbard

One statement must be made about Muskegon Community College’s Theater Department: they have guts!

In recent years this brave organization has produced some of the most challenging works of the Western stage, including Shakespeare’s complex tragedy, “King Lear,” and Lanford Wilson’s difficult drama, “The Rimers of Eldritch.”

Now, as if to top all previous efforts, this small department faces perhaps its most daunting challenge to date. Currently playing at the Overbrook Theatre, Eugene O’Neill’s autobiographical “Long Day’s Journey into Night” frightens away all but the most seasoned of professional actors. Predictably, the results of MCC’s attempt to tame this masterpiece of pathos may best be described as mixed.

Arguably the greatest play from America’s greatest playwright, “Long Day’s Journey into Night” chronicles a day and night in the life of an extremely dysfunctional family. At the play’s center looms the miserly figure of James Tyrone. Once a great Shakespearean actor, he squandered his talent on empty melodrama. Problems intensify when his beloved wife, Mary, relapses into an addiction to morphine; she haunts the play like specter.

The cast also includes a sneering alcoholic son named Jamie, and his tuberculosis stricken brother named Edmund (a character based on O’Neil himself). Combined, these four miserable people inflict the stage with enough despair to justify a lifetime prescription to Prozac.

At its core, “Long Day’s Journey into Night” is an actor’s play. With the exception of the small role of a maid (delightfully played by Sarah Fields), each character delivers several juicy monologues. These wrenching speeches represent some of the greatest individual moments in American drama. They also stand out as some of the most difficult to successfully pull-off.

As James Tyrone, a role described by actor Jack Lemon as the toughest part he ever played, local actor Fred Sanderlin gives an admirable effort. Sanderlin seems a bit miscast at times. He does not possess the appearance of an aging “matinee idol” or “the famous beautiful voice” called for in the script. His performance shows the earmarks of a hard working actor stretching himself to his limits and beyond.

In her role of Mary Tyrone, Marcia Howe does her best acting in the moments when she is left alone onstage. In these brief and powerful scenes, the audience witnesses the muscular spasms of addiction as they ravish her body. Overall, Howe portrays Mary’s lapse into morphine-induced madness with honesty and conviction.

Newcomer Jared Michael Heeren cuts his teeth on the meaty role of the self-hating Jamie. Although he lacks subtlety and training, he imbues the role with rustic enthusiasm. In contrast, Chris Cook brings a low-key dignity to Edmund. Although he falls short conveying the imagery

of Edmund's monologues, Cook's overall portrayal provides a sense of the poet lurking within the sick and consumptive Edmund.

Considering the difficulty of the play and the inexperience of the cast, director Sheila Kulp Wahamaki deserves credit for pulling the production together. Some of Wahamaki's staging choices do seem puzzling, particularly her repeated decision not to move her actors around during their many long speeches. This static approach causes the actors to miss moments of dramatic emphasis. The overall lack of visual movement also makes a long play (over three and a half hours) seem longer.

Another expected but unfortunate quality resulting from the length of the play comes across in the frequent line drops, interrupted lines, and the unshakable sensation that actors are paraphrasing O'Neill's dialog. Again, an audience expects these kind of rough edges when an amateur cast tackles a theatrical monster like "Long Day's Journey into Night." Hopefully, many of these timing, memory, and ensemble problems will cure themselves as the run continues.

The design and technical elements represent a real strength of the production. Brian James Goodman's scenery conveys the run-down yet ornate quality of the Tyrone summer home. Richard J. Oman's darkly textured lighting design hints at the fog lapping in from the nearby harbor. With the exception of a couple of very contemporary looking neckties, Jeanette Wahr's costume design effectively conveys the period of the show.

As an overall assessment, MCC's production recalls a review I once read of a college production of "Hamlet," one of the few plays perhaps more difficult to produce than "Long Day's Journey into Night." In the review, the critic described the experience as similar to watching a group of novice mountain climbers ascend Everest. "In the conclusion," he wrote, "there was more relief than jubilation."

Understandably, this production of "Long Day's Journey into Night" did not successfully scale every peak within the drama. In truth, I found myself a bit relieved when it finally finished. This fact does not mean, however, that the effort was in vain. Through O'Neill's rich language, his tragic story, and the noble efforts of some brave actors, the immense power of a great American masterpiece survives.

Muskegon Community College's Theater Department deserves praise for their efforts to bring this great play to us. They certainly did not choose an easy path.

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