

Review of "The Rimers of Eldritch"
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By Robert Hubbard

Imagine Thornton Wilder's "Our Town" without hope, beauty or nostalgia for small town life. Imagine Harper Lee's "To Kill a Mockingbird" absent of Atticus Finch's integrity, Scout's courage, or redemption for Boo Radley. Combine these images and you have a sense of the world created in Lanford Wilson's "The Rimers of Eldritch." Currently playing at Muskegon Community College's Overbrook Theatre, this early play from one of America's most under appreciated playwrights paints a bleak and cynical portrait of a small, Midwestern town. Indeed, the hypocrisy, double-dealing and intense cruelty displayed by the residents of Eldritch makes Wilson's fictional village appear closer to Dante's Inferno than to Andy Griffith's Mayberry.

The plot of "Rimers" hinges on the suspicious death of a town outcast named Skelly Mannor. Nothing is as it seems concerning the incidents of his untimely demise; those in possession of the truth refuse to divulge it.

As a storyteller, Wilson makes use of an episodic plotting style that at first is difficult to follow. Many scenes appear out of sequence or replay multiple times with differing emphasis. But as the two-hour drama progresses, the sketchy events leading to Skelly's death gradually come into focus. The climax packs quite a punch. In life, Skelly's status as a loner and outsider becomes a lightning rod for the town's collective fears and prejudices. The truth behind his death powerfully exposes these dark forces to the light.

Perhaps the greatest strength of MCC's production lies in the strong performances of its ensemble cast. Some performances stand out as particularly strong.

As the outcast Skelly, Terry Ireland instills his role with integrity and pathos worthy of this richly written character. His long monologue kicking-off Act Two rings with humor and sensitivity. In an equally impressive transformation, Loretta Robinson disappears into her role as the elderly and senile Mary Windrod. Robinson's impressive vocal and physical transformation into old age makes the liberally applied old-age makeup she wears seem almost unnecessary.

Other strong performances include Chris Cook's pensive and complex Robert Conklin, Fran Harryman's blindly maternal Evelyn, and Anette Bach's feisty Cora Groves, the café owner trapped in Eldritch by a runaway spouse. Combined with strong performances from the rest of the cast, these beautifully realized characterizations create a landscape of hopeless futures and doomed relationships.

Director Tom Harryman sculpts a solid production. Certain images leap forward as especially magical. The depiction of domestic violence using slow motion choreography cast in an eerie red light surfaces late in the play as a disturbing and moving stage picture. Equally impressive is Harryman's use of actors' bodies to signify trees in the woods surrounding the small town. This decision increases the sense of claustrophobia present throughout the play; even in moments of supposed privacy the people of Eldritch look on.

The episodic structure of “Rimers” presents several directing problems that Harryman and his lighting designer, Richard J. Oman, do not completely overcome. Many transitions between shorter scenes appear clunky as actors either rush into place or wait in pregnant pauses for the lighting cues to reach them. This persistent problem hinders the show’s overall pacing, and may contribute to a minor epidemic of actors dropping lines or prematurely interrupting each other. This said, the difficult nature of the script makes problems such as these difficult to avoid and easy to forgive.

The rest of the technical elements are strong throughout. Oman and Brian J. Goodman’s evocative scene design effectively convey the sense of a dilapidated coal town crumbling into the past. Likewise, Jeanette Wahr’s costume design appropriately represents the essence of each of the characters.

In the final analysis, MCC’s production of Wilson’s 1966 play shows a nasty side of midwestern values and small-town American life. So scathing is the portrait that I can easily imagine the rural stereotypes of Wilson’s drama as offensive to members of small towns in the same way that urban stereotypes offend city dwellers. Whereas Hollywood’s black and white depictions of Mayberry and other perfect bergs now appear too idyllic, Wilson’s Eldritch may push the pendulum too far toward total depravity. The truth undoubtedly lies somewhere in between. Let us at least hope so.

In the meantime, this dark portrayal makes for a compelling evening of theatre.

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