

Arts & Culture

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13

THEATER

'Coyote on the Fence' Excellent Theater In Every Way

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

With "Coyote on the Fence," Silver Spring Stage gives a strong production of a very tricky and controversial play. There are so many times this play could fall into total cliché, and Bruce Graham's script at times verges on it, but the strong writing and equally strong production saves the day.

Any script that deals with the topic of capital punishment automatically falls under the rubric of "controversial." It's one of those red state/blue state issues that can really define where you fall in the political spectrum. One thing I will give playwright Graham's script is that his four person drama in the end does not take the easy way out. While most people would like to make this a black and white issue, "Coyote" shows us what a messy quagmire this topic really is.

The setup does not look promising. John Brennan is an unusual death row prisoner – wanting to watch Trauffaut movies on cable TV, editing the Death Row newspaper, and getting into trouble when his statements make it onto the BBC special. His newest cell partner is the exact opposite – Bobby Redburn is not very intelligent, but he is definitely an out and out racist. Add a New York Times reporter with various motives and a female prisoner guard to comment on the action and it all looks too simple and schematic. I'm sure Death Row is littered with fans of French new wave films.

But then we start adding shades of gray, with the added tension that the execution dates for these men are approaching. Brennan maintains his innocence to the very end (or does he?) and uses all the legal appeals that he can. Bobby turns out to be a real winner – a truly dislikable character, but with a past history that is hardly



PHOTOS BY NEIL EDGELL

Brendan Murray (Sam Fried), Audrey Cefaly (Shawna DuChamps) and Andy Greenleaf (John Brennan)

less comforting. Bobby is not fighting his execution, which drives Brennan nuts.

Andy Greenleaf as John and Darius Suziedelis as Bobby do a lot to make these two main characters interesting and a lot more than stick figures in a political debate. Suziedelis has the harder job, trying to make human a truly despicable character and yet with childish humor, he makes Bobby not likeable but at least worthy of some pity. Greenleaf uses scenes of anger and occasional honest to let us see John Brennan as something more than a Death Row saint, the character we would like to think he is.

Brendan Murray as reporter Sam Fried and Audrey Cefaly as guard Shawna DuChamps do a good job in supporting roles that take us out of the stifling confines of the prison. They supply

us with additional information and viewpoints we would not otherwise get. Cefaly also adds a lot of humor to the proceedings, noting at one point her husband "left her for another man – Jack Daniels."

The play is 110 minutes without intermission, but director Bridget Muehlberger paces it well. This is especially important since the script is not plot driven, but constantly shifting viewpoints. Greenleaf's set design is quite imaginative – a claustrophobic set of cells that allows for fences to be moved for exterior scenes and unit set areas for other acting areas. Also good is Don Slater's moody lighting and Kevin Garrett's sound design, a constant bustling of noise that at key points grows eerily silent.

The other key point is that playwright Gra-



Darius Suziedelis (Bobby Alvin Redburn)

ham does not tell us where he stands on the issue (although just by writing this play I can take a good guess). What do we do with the Bobby Redburns of the world – and if this is not the solution, what is? And what do we do with the even less defined cases like Jack Brennan? If Sam Fried's faux liberalism or Shawna DuChamps's "it's just a job" attitude are not the solution, is there one? "Coyote on a Fence" intelligently tackles very emotional issues, leaves many doors open and gives us no way out.

"Coyote on the Fence" continues at Silver Spring Stage through April 30. For reservations, call (301) 593-6036.

"Coyote on the Fence"
Silver Spring Stage
★★★★

THEATER

Time for Honesty In 'The Retreat from Moscow'

By David Cannon
Sentinel Arts Critic

I am of two minds concerning the current Round House Theater show "The Retreat from Moscow." Without question, playwright William Nicholson has penned a beautifully written script. Director James Edmondson directs with a knowing eye for detail, and his three actors are carefully chosen and each gives a powerful and detailed performance.

It is a four star production, but I felt that after the play established its

basic premise, it had nowhere to go and went there quite slowly and deliberately.

Part of this is my aversion to soap opera plots and "Moscow" is in many ways a superior soap opera. The story concerns a family in modern day England: Alice and Edward and their 32-year-old son Jamie. After decades of marriage, Edward leaves and soon Jamie finds himself in the middle of an emotionally draining and messy divorce between his parents, whom he both loves and questions.

I know what you are thinking – this play cuts a little too close to the



PHOTO BY STAN BAROUH

Alice (Carol Mayo Jenkins) pleads with Edward (Rick Foucheux) to save their marriage.

bone, hey David? Well, no. My parents never went through a divorce and neither have I. I can watch "Retreat from Moscow" from a very objective standpoint, but wonder how anyone who has actually gone through this ugly process could enjoy watching this play. Nicholson takes an unflinching, warts and all view of a family crisis and the claustrophobic setting at Round House Theater hermetically seals you into this situation.

Now, if you enjoyed a movie like "The Squid and the Whale," you will probably love this production. It is

See Moscow, page 14