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'Lost in Yonkers' balances its laughs with compassion

REVIEW — Neil Simon's "Lost in Yonkers," which opened at the Camelot Theatre in Talent on Friday, is not your usual Simon comedy. Yes, there are the playwright's clever one-liners, and there is a curmudgeon as the foil for the action. But "Lost in Yonkers," which won the 1991 Tony Award for Best Play and the 1991...

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Photo courtesy of Steve Sutfin

If you go

WHAT: Paul Simon's "Lost in Yonkers"
WHERE: Camelot Theatre Company's James Morrison Collier Theatre at 101 Talent Avenue, Talent, Oregon
WHEN: Today, May 14-18, 22-25, 29-31; Sunday matinees...

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salesman to satisfy the debt as quickly as possible.

His young two sons, Arty and Jay, will stay with Eddie's formidable mother and mentally challenged sister, Bella, in Yonkers in their apartment above a candy store.

Grandma Kurnitz makes a Tiger Mother look warm and fuzzy. She is strict and unloving and her unbending and abusive parenting took its toll on each of her children. At Grandma's, there are no games, there is no loud music and no laughter. Even the irrepressible, childlike Bella cowers in fear when Grandma is around.

The boys' relentlessly stultifying routine is broken when Uncle Louie arrives, looking for a safe place to hide. Louie is a bagman for the mob who has helped himself to a bag of money and now has to figure out how to escape the consequences. The situation really explodes when Bella reveals to the family that she has fallen in love and wants to get married to a man with similar mental limitations.

While "Lost in Yonkers" is told through the eyes of 13-year-old Arty and 15-year-old Jay, the focus of the play is on the conflict between affection-starved Bella and unyielding Grandma. The characters in "Lost in Yonkers" could easily become stereotypes or laugh lines. It is a credit to

By Roberta Kent

Posted May. 11, 2014 @ 12:01 am
Updated May 16, 2014 at 11:39 AM

Neil Simon's "Lost in Yonkers," which opened at the Camelot Theatre in Talent on Friday, is not your usual Simon comedy. Yes, there are the playwright's clever one-liners, and there is a curmudgeon as the foil for the action. But "Lost in Yonkers," which won the 1991 Tony Award for Best Play and the 1991 Pulitzer Prize for Drama, will more often than not put a lump in your throat and have you catching your breath.

It is 1942 and Eddie Kurnitz has just lost his wife to cancer. He borrowed money for her medical bills from a loan shark and now needs to take a high-paying job as a traveling

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Susan E. Aversa's nearly faultless direction and her talented Camelot cast that Simon's delicate balance of exaggeration and compassion comes through.

The street-wise Jay and the brash Arty have to carry the play's structure, and Reese Rush and Leo Pierotti are quite marvelous as the two boys. The young actors consistently stay in character, maintaining their Bronx dialect and never missing a beat of Simon's rat-a-tat timing. Rush, a junior at South Medford High School, has done nine shows at Camelot plus professional commercial, film and voiceover work. Pierotti appeared at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in "To Kill a Mockingbird."

Marlena Gray is heartrending as Bella — childlike and naive but never laughable. Gray makes Bella's frustration and pain palpable and immensely moving.

Kristie Abart has the thankless role of Grandma Kurnitz. Grandma may not be a philosopher but she lives by Nietzsche's maxim "that which does not kill us makes us stronger."

As the reasons for Grandma's coldness and cruelty emerge, Abart perceptibly unbends a bit, giving the audience glimpses into what Grandma was before and what she could have been. It's a subtle and polished performance.

Once again, though, it is Roy Von Rains, Jr. who nearly walks away with the play. Rains has the swagger, the bravado and the vulnerability of Louie down pat, and he is always a joy to watch on stage.

Aaron J. Falk as Eddie and Kathleen Marrs as Aunt Gert nicely bookend the action.

Don Zastoupil's 1940's Yonkers apartment is spot on, as are Addie Hall-Kester's costumes and Virginia Caro Hudson's wigs. Paul R. Jones did the lighting design and Brian O'Connor provided the sound design.

"Lost in Yonkers" is a clear-eyed look at what fear, loss and the lack of love do to a family, and Simon pulls no punches. Camelot's production skillfully captures the pain — and ultimately hope — that infuse the play.

"Lost in Yonkers" plays at Camelot through June 1. For information, call 541-535-5250 or see www.camelottheatre.org.

Roberta Kent is a freelance writer living in Ashland. Reach her at rbkent@mind.net.

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