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BEYOND THERAPY

Christopher Durang's Beyond Therapy is beyond hilarious

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He called it *Beyond Therapy*, but he could have easily have titled it *Beyond Hilarious*. Indeed, Paul Steinsland, the show's Technical Director, praised, "It was hysterically funny, even after seeing it for the eighteenth time!"

Under East Side Player's Director Gail Evans and Producer Jan Francis, *Beyond Therapy* – Christopher Durang's outrageous romp about the trails and tribulations that men and women often endure in search of love - opened on 27 May, 2010.

It showed at the recently renovated *Papermill Theatre* at

Todmorden Mills Heritage Museum and Arts Centre in the heart of Toronto's charming borough of East York. East Side Players has been the resident theatre company at this museum since 1972, and is among Toronto's longest established community theatre groups. Formed in 1967 when East York Players joined with Leaside Players, this company has been engaging community and family audiences alike for well over 40 years. In fact, more than 200,000 theatregoers have enjoyed over 180 shows.

After twenty-nine years since it was originally preformed at the *Phoenix Theatre*, in New York City on 1 January, 1981, Christopher Durang's *Beyond Therapy* made its debut on the Canadian stage. Durang was born in Montclair, New Jersey. His mother was a secretary and his father was an architect. After receiving a B.A. in English from Harvard, Durang obtained an M.F.A. in playwriting from the Yale School of Drama.

Beyond Therapy is about two Manhattanites – Bruce and Prudence – who are looking for love in all the wrong places. At the request of their

psychiatrists, both of who are deeply in need of therapy themselves, Bruce and Prudence are cajoled into placing personal ads as a more effective means of meeting people. Bruce is a meek and emotionally over-charged bisexual whose uncontrollable fits of loud sobbing alienate him from woman looking for strong men. Prudence is a weak willed woman who has great trouble asserting herself and a fear of commitment, despite her sexual laxity.

In the first scene, in a Chicago restaurant, Bruce is seated at a table examining his watch as Prudence suddenly enters, intently reading a magazine. After an awkward introduction, Bruce accuses Prudence of “making eyes” at the waiter, and breaks into a hysterical fit of gushy sobbing. Once Bruce gets a grip, he turns to Prudence and says, “I feel better after that, you have a lovely mouth...I can tell you are very sensitive. I want you to have my children”.

Following their first meeting, Bruce and Prudence both report back to their respective psychiatrists. Prudence’s therapist, Stuart Framingham – who once seduced her and blames his

overblown rage and erectile dysfunctions of the fast-paced society of our modern world – suggests that she has a fear of commitment. Dr. Framingham also becomes extremely embittered and jealous, pouting and acting like an over-grown child.

Bruce’s bipolar therapist, Charlotte - who acknowledges her patients progress through the wagging and barking of a stuffed Snoopy dog - informs Bruce that he has indeed made progress in his therapy by crying openly in front of women. Clearly the two therapists are more troubled than their patients.

As the play unfolds, we learn that Bruce is a bi-sexual and has a lover – Bob – whom he lives with. Despite Bruce’s sexual appetites, he and Prudence develop a relationship and begin seeing each other on a regular basis. Finding out that a woman has come between him and his lover, Bob decides that he is going to commit suicide to “even the score”. *Beyond Therapy* comes to a close with an outrageously farcical scene full of gun shots, the yelling of sexual epithets, cursing, and the bearing of chests. By the end of the play, the audience erupts into laughter, hoots,

whistles and a much-deserved thundering chorus of applause.

Even to an average theatre-goer it is evident that this performance of *Beyond Therapy* owes much of its success to its talented director, Gail Evans, and it is no wonder that East Side Players has received numerous awards for “Best Director”. Not only has Gail done any excellent job of casting the appropriate actors and actresses for the exceedingly difficult roles in this play, but it seems – based on her interaction with the players during the talk-back session following Wednesday night’s performance – that she has developed a wonderful comradery with her performers that has allowed them to become one with their characters. Gail has been with East Side Players since the early 80s, and her passion for directing and “being around the theatre” has indeed rubbed off on the cast of *Beyond Therapy* in an outstanding way.

In addition to a strong relationship between director and players, this play is also a hit because of the diverse skills and outstanding talents of its actors and actresses. Although this is only Matthew Domville’s (**Bruce**) second

performance with East Side Players, his extensive training with several Ottawa theatre companies has given him a certain pizzazz; an erratic flair for producing laughter that has transcended the Canadian stage. Not only is Matthew extremely adept at playing the difficult role of Bruce, a sexually challenged male, his ability to cry on cue and seemingly effortless mood swings, make for a stunning lead role that really sets the dramatic and comedic tone of the play.

Playing alongside Matthew, Heather Roberts (**Prudence**) is an avid fan of Durang’s work. Having appeared in a number of plays with East Side Players, Heather is a natural actress whose enthusiasm is evident in the way she gracefully moves across the stage. At times her shrieking voice and bantering tone is quite distracting to the audience, often making her seem as if she is over-playing her character. However, Heather is well fitted for her role as a woman afraid of commitment, and she does an excellent job of showing her annoyance throughout the play in verbal as well as physical gestures that are both hilarious and astoundingly life-like. It must also be

remarked that the success of the main characters in this play is a direct result of the powerfully funny performances of the supporting cast.

Jane Hunter who plays Bruce's therapist, Charlotte, quite possibly has the most challenging role in the whole play. Neighing, barking and screaming out sexual slander is not something easily done, but Jane gives such talents an uncannily realistic appearance, causing the audience to jump their seats in fits of full-throttle laughter. Andy Ingram (**Stuart Framingham**) also does an amazing job of playing a therapist that is in need of a taste of his own medicine. Not only does he have the bold chest to bear as a macho and manly man, but he has the swagger to make it believable and outrageously funny. His fist of sexual frustration and rage constitute some of the funniest moments of this play.

Although Ryan Fisher (**Bob**) is a graduate of the joint-acting program at Sheridan College and a new face in the East Side Players retinue, he plays the role of an effeminate, neurotic and challenged homosexual to a tee.

Daryn DeWalt (**Andrew, the waiter**) is an award-winning actor

who has been with East Side Players for over nine years now. Although he has a seemingly small role, he is the glue which holds the loose ends of this farce in place. As the play comes to a close, disrobing from his waiter uniform and bearing his arms which are full of tattoos, Daryn delivers the final punch-line of the play, once again reminding the audience of the nuanced trials and tribulations that exist in the contemporary urban setting.

Overall, East Side Player's production of *Beyond Therapy* was a success. Christopher Durang's *Beyond Therapy* presents a nuanced take on the "contemporary urban psyche", full of non-stop laughter, relationships and situations that range from fantastic to ridiculous. *Beyond Therapy* is not simply beyond hilarity, but it is a work of art. Despite lacking a little depth, this production gives audiences more than what they paid for in laughs!

Four Stars