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MARIA TZAVARAS | Jun 03, 2011 - 8:27 AM | Report a Typo or Correction

Strong performances pace Present Laughter

Noel Coward comedy presented by East Side Players

Actors are notoriously known to have equal parts ego and insecurity to go along with the adoration and judgement the profession begets.

In Present Laughter by Noel Coward, and East Side Players (ESP) final show of the season, one aging actor is having a hard time adjusting his spotlight to be age appropriate, and letting go of the follies that come with immaturity and youth.

This show can only be described as a comedy on steroids. Not only did the theatre come alive with laughter, but a mid-life crisis has never been so hysterically portrayed on stage.

When you see the elegant set - marble floors, artwork adorning the walls and a posh piano in the corner - you may think the play is about boring rich people. But the rich are often the most eccentric, and in this case, none more than actor, Garry Essendine (Robert Ouellette).

Much like it takes a village to raise a child, Garry also needs one to keep him in check.

His assistant Monica (Valerie Abels) and his estranged wife Liz (Nicole Downie), are more like his mothers as they are constantly keeping him in line and on task.

There is also house staff Miss Erikson (Edith Acker) and Fred (Chris Irving), his producer Hugo (Daryn DeWalt) and business partner Morris (Ted Powers), all of whom get entangled in Garry's dramas.

Middle-aged and denying it, Garry likes to fraternize with younger women and let them down gently. In the beginning of the show we meet one such example of this behaviour, Daphne (Madison Walsh), who is the latest victim of his charms. However, everyone falls for him, and while he calls it nauseating, his neediness welcomes it.

A self-professed actor to the core, Garry is always "on stage," and sees each moment as another opportunity to hone his craft. He is melodramatic, childish and whether he's letting Daphne down easy, dealing with his staff or his business partners, he is always in character.

Despite preying on young impressionable girls, having every need catered to him and seemingly no regard for anyone but himself, you may think he is an unlikable character. However, he's so pathetically insecure and childlike, you end up laughing at the drama he both creates and gravitates towards him naturally.

Like the beautiful and alluring Joanna (Heather Goodall), Hugo's wife, who has decided not only to have an affair

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with fellow business partner Morris (Ted Powers), but with Garry as well. There is also a young male admirer named Roland (Stephen McLarty) that shows up on his door one morning and never leaves.

This show is less about a straightforward plot than it is a snapshot into the life of an eccentric and egotistical man, and those who love and have to put up with him.

It's the dialogue and the performances that make this show great, both as an ensemble cast and the individual characters portrayed.

Ouellette as Garry was phenomenal, so much so that I imagine as a playwright this is how you'd hope the character you created would be portrayed. He brings Garry to life in a way that's uniquely his own, is hysterical and a pleasure to watch.

The show boasts some amazing female performances. Abels and Downie as Monica and Liz, the caretakers of the man-boy Garry, were always poised yet funny as they deal with Garry's antics.

Walsh as the lovesick Daphne is so over-the top and fun to watch, and Goodall as Joanna is a beautiful as she is captivating on stage.

The men also deliver, namely McLarty, who stole many scenes as the obsessed fan Roland. He plays unstable very well and brings laughter into every scene he's in.

If you're looking for fun evening of comedy, Present Laughter is the one to see.

The remaining shows of Present Laughter are June 2 - 11, 8 p.m. with one 2 p.m. matinee on June 5, at The Papermill Theatre, 67 Pottery Rd. Tickets are \$20 and \$15 for students. For tickets call 416-425-0917 or visit www.eastsideplayers.com

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