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By Eric McMillan

Speaking to the human condition

Actors work hard to get across the difficulty of communicating



PHOTO COURTESY EASTSIDE PLAYERS

TROUBLED TWOSOMES: Four actors paired off in different ways in play about miscommunication. *Speaking in Tongues* at Papermill Theatre featured, from left, Ted Powers, Steve Switzman, Lydia Kiselyk and Kizzy Kaye.

REVIEW

***Speaking in Tongues*, by Andrew Bovell, directed by Anne Harper, The Papermill Theatre at Todmorden Mills, running to March 7.**

Speaking in Tongues doesn't speak to everyone. It's a challenging play, not the usual comforting community theatre fare, and to judge by the tepid audience response on a recent wintry evening, not everyone is up to the challenge.

Which is too bad, because the economically staged production by the Eastside Players at Papermill is quite good.

Australian playwright Bovell writes dramas about relationships, but often presented in fractured, elliptical fashion. The four actors who play all the roles in *Speaking* must have themselves been challenged tremendously but they manage to pull it off.

Take that stunning first scene: Two sets of would-be philanderers hold the stage at the same time but separately – Pete and Sonja on the left, Leon and Jane on the right – each pair having just met at a bar and heading toward consummating their affair, presumably in a motel. Each couple mouths nearly identical words: sexual foreplay, confessing they've never done this before, doubts about whether they should, comments on how much they love their respective spouses, and so on. Strikingly the dialogue is fired off simultaneously by the two duos – sometimes in unison, sometimes chiming in on certain words, sometimes with a call-and-response, and sometimes by throwing in conflicting phrases, as when the pairs reach different destinations.

Split-second timing makes it all work.

Later, the married couples reunite somewhat shakily: Pete with – you guessed it – Jane, and Leon with Sonja. The dialogue-in-counterpoint has ended but the dramatic complications are just beginning.

In the course of an argument Jane relates an upsetting story about a neighbour she suspects is a murderer, and Leon embarks on a tale about a man he met who seems to have committed suicide – stories that bring in other couples whose lives are complicatedly interwoven with theirs in later parts of the play.

All the elements are also time-shifted and shuffled, like a post-modern detective story. (Leon's the detective.)

It's alternately confusing and exhilarating as the pieces click into place. And they do indeed fall into place to make one big, completed jigsaw picture, although not necessarily in the drama's playing time.

Suffice it to say, in the car ride home at least one couple from the audience was still trying to piece it together.

“Oh, so that guy who was writing a last letter to his ex-girlfriend is the one Leon was talking about who killed himself... and his girlfriend's therapist was the woman who accosted Pete in the street, the same woman who was maybe murdered...”

You might think that having only four actors play nine roles – including at least 11 pairings of some kind or another that I counted – would make it all the more confusing, but it doesn't. For the actors are so different in each of their characters. Kizzy Kaye, Lydia Kiselyk, Ted Powers and Steve Switzman were uniformly excellent, given the difficult material.

It's hard to choose a standout in this ensemble achievement, but I was especially impressed by Powers, perhaps because he had three roles to the others' two. Each of his three characters was visually marked with a slightly different hairstyle, small marks on the face and, in one case, a sweater thrown over the shoulders. Yet, through voice and manner, a vastly different background was created for each character.

Similar comments could be made about each of the other three actors' dual roles.

However, they weren't helped by the extremely sparse set design. Across the back a flat, drearily splotted wall with three moveable panels and on the bare stage a series of boxes rearranged between scenes to suggest various furnishings.

The theme of the play is obviously the difficulty of human communication, especially within relationships. I'm not sure much more than this was communicated to an audience that may have sought entertaining relief from such grim realities. Uplifting the play is not.

I suppose *Speaking in Tongues* could have been played for its buried, absurdist humour, much as *Waiting for Godot* often is.

But an earnestly presented production of such a play offers rewards for those who appreciate theatre for occasionally providing something to perplex them – and to keep them thinking about it for days afterwards.

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