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Hard Bargain Players - ARCHIVE

June 6 – 14, 2003

How I Learned to Drive

Reviewed June 10

Running time 1 hour 40 minutes

The urge to create theater must be extremely strong. You can find performances everywhere. From modern performing arts centers to ancient amphitheatres, people respond to the need to put on a show, which is a very good thing since people also have the need to go out and see a show. The Potomac Region is blessed with plenty of the modern structures like the Kennedy Center, smaller but no less imposing dedicated spaces like Round House and tiny spaces like Gunston Theatre II. We have outdoor mega-structures like Wolf Trap. But how many know that we have a theater in the woods so small, so intimate and so remote that a trip to the theater is like a get away from urban cares? The maybe-60-seat amphitheater at the Hard Bargain Farm is only a dozen miles from the Beltway but it is a world away from all it represents. Still, the plays the Hard Bargain Players put on are definitely of the modern world, raising issues of today. And, if this production is any indication, they do a highly competent job of it, too.

Storyline: Paula Vogel's Pulitzer Prize winning one act play deals in a very understanding way with the pain of sexual abuse within a family. It is constructed of scenes from the memory of the victim ranging from when, at age eleven, an uncle by marriage began to abuse her until, as an adult, she broke the cycle of abuse. What sets the play apart is that it presents each member of the family in very human terms, with the abuser himself being more than just a reprehensible villain, but a victim of prior abuse carrying on a cycle.

Through humor and a keen eye for illustrative detail, Vogel creates characters that competent actors can bring to very satisfying life, and the cast here is more than merely competent. The two leads, are particularly strong. Juliette Kelsey Chagnon avoids the trap of overdoing the age differences between scenes. It would be easy to make her scenes as an eleven year old begging her mother for permission to go on an outing, or as a young teen being ogled by a boy at a school dance too comic if she used little girl mannerisms and a little girl voice. But she, and director Brian Donohue, recognize that these scenes take place in her mind so she wouldn't look young to herself -- she would just be herself. Played straight like this, they are highly effective and warmly humorous.

Bill Brock also avoids gimmicking up his performance as the abusing uncle. Just as that uncle attempted to use charm to seduce his niece, so Brock uses charm to seduce the audience well before the extent of his weakness is made plain. He also lets the audience see the anguish his character feels as he succumbs to impulses he knows are wrong but which he can't control. His is a nicely nuanced performance. The three supporting roles involve creating multiple minor and not-so-minor characters. Mike Mortensen did a fine job going everywhere from breast-obsessed teenager to grandfather.

The play requires simple staging using just a few chairs and simple costuming for the cast of five (plus the voice of a sixth) but also a video projection system that is not simple by any means for a company performing in the woods. Making a virtue out of necessity, the theatre moved the starting time for this production to 8:30 so the enveloping darkness would enhance the video and then devised a program of 1950's trailers for cheap drive-in movies ("Teenage Gang Debts" and "Cry Baby Killer") along with commercials ("Your Family Deserves Protection - See Your Agent Tomorrow!") announcements ("Bottle Warming Service at the Concession Stand") and even a cartoon ("Self Made Mongrel") to set the mood.

Written by Paula Vogel. Directed by Brian Donohue. Pre-Show Video by Ben Hillard. Design: Tony Zanelotti-Kruszka (costumes and properties) Julianna Bogdan (lights and stage management) Brian Donohue (sound) Randy Tusing (choreography) Doris Sharp (photography). Cast: Bill Brock, Juliette Kelsey Chagnon, Suzanne L. Fehl, Mike Mortensen, Sarah Vacin, Alex Zavistovich.