

Family road trip has comedy, soul

by Hedy Weiss

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You don't have to be the child of a small-town Iowa couple living in the midst of hog farms and cornfields to identify with everything about "Leaving Iowa," the simultaneously hilarious and touching play by Tim Clue and Spike Manton that is now in the intimate confines of the Royal George Theatre's cabaret space.

As this particular hard-core baby-boomer from New York can attest, regionalism takes a back seat when it comes to the saga of a family of modest means heading out on that precious one-week summer vacation, circa 1960, in a car without air conditioning. For "Leaving Iowa" is a spot-on evocation of family dynamics and the quest for high-minded educational adventure (courtesy of Dad and a go-along mom), when all that is really desired (just ask the kids) is some unadulterated water-slide fun.

THEATER REVIEW

LEAVING IOWA

HIGHLY RECOMMENDED

When: To July 2

Where: Royal George Cabaret, 1641 N. Halsted

Tickets: \$37-\$42

Call: (312) 988-9000

Jack Kerouac may have spun the fantasy of a free-wheeling American road trip for several generations of readers, but Clue and Manton bring us right back to reality with their play. And as someone who still vividly recalls a trip to the Gettysburg battlefield in a sweltering crockpot of a Dodge Dart, I can tell you this rerun of reality is priceless.

In its overall structure, "Leaving Iowa" plays a variation on a classic - William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. At its core is the story of Don Browning (a deftly calibrated performance by Kelly Cooper), a Boston journalist who returns home to Winterset, Iowa, for a family visit. It has been three years since the death of his dad (Bradley Armacost), and an urn of ashes is still sitting in the house. As Don,

who never quite set things right with his dad, sets out to find the proper burial spot for those ashes, his mind goes into rewind, and the memories of one particularly zany family car trip taken with his dad, mom (Angela Bullard) and sister (Barb Wengerd) lead him to precisely the right site.

Armacost, a master of understatement, is so inside his character that his brown pants and plaid shirt seem part of his skin. A history teacher, Dad will have nothing to do with tourist ripoffs like the Dells, so the plan is to visit Hannibal, Mo., and both kids have been duly outfitted with copies of Mark Twain's short stories in preparation. The siblings' bonds, and their dysfunctions, are classic, as is the husband and wife relationship, with Mom (Bullard's face is fabulously expressive) exploding only when she finally gets to take over at the wheel and is hounded beyond endurance. Dad's steely resistance to hype, combined with his thriftiness, his bullheadedness and his propensity for taking the wrong turn, make him not so much a despot as a sort of Don Quixote of the heartland.

While Don is a rather passive kid who has grown resigned to disappointment, his younger sister will not be thwarted in her quest for adventure and fun. She will end up as a housewife and mother, but clearly she had all the makings of a powerhouse attorney, with a gift for relentless pleading and bargaining. And Wengerd turns in a performance of such high energy, lightning shifts of emotion and comic panache that it should earn her a job on "Saturday Night Live" (even if she did just get back from several years of working in New York).

Finally there is Brian McCartney, a great barrel of a man who plays every other character the family meets along the way, and does so with sleight-of-hand costume changes and a sense of absolute glee that are infectious.

Clue has cast and directed the production with all the insight of an insider, with Grant Sabin's glowing cornfield set (lit by Ben Wilhelm) giving the Great Plains perspective on a tiny stage, and Sharon Sanders' costumes endowing it all with a period-perfect aura.

The family car trip may or may not survive the current upward spiral in oil prices. But it's a sure bet that they don't make men quite like Dad anymore -- those members of "the greatest generation." They might have missed the ideal highway exit from time to time, but they never lost their sense of America. Happily, "Leaving Iowa," a comedy with a surprisingly deep soul, is here to memorialize them.

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