

THEATER REVIEW:

'Leaving Iowa' a fun, nostalgic trip

By Tom Titus

Thursday, November 20, 2008

It's a safe bet that playgoers visiting "Leaving Iowa" at the Laguna Playhouse will be launched on a trip of their own — a memory jaunt back to their younger days cramped into the family buggy with Mom, Dad and assorted siblings — and wondering aloud, "Are we there yet?"

This West Coast premiere of the nostalgic comedy by Tim Clue and Spike Manton, and directed by Clue, intertwines past and present into an often hilarious memory comedy with twinges of heart tugging mixed in with the eternal squabbling.

The setting is Winterset, Iowa, where — viewers are continually reminded — John Wayne was born. "Home of the Duke," they say proudly, in their best imitation of the late movie star. Iowa's other claims to fame are presented as a slide show prior to curtain time, so arrive early for a few extra laughs.

The play's central character, Don (Kevin Symons), both narrates the story and participates in present and past sequences. He's long since left Iowa for a writing career in Boston, but returns three years after his father's death to help solve a dilemma — what to do with Dad's ashes.

As Don drives around the Iowa countryside, he's thrust back in memory to the road trips he and his family took each summer. Dad (Gregory North) would drive while Mom (Jill Brennan) studied the guidebook and watched for mile markers; Don and his bratty younger sister (Erin Bennett) would hassle one another in the rear seat.

The smoothly humming motor of this production is Symons' terrific performance as the frustrated son, fighting guilt pangs for having stayed away so long and reverting to childhood in the frenetic flashbacks. This is Symons' seventh assignment on the Laguna stage, and he's never been better.

North also is a potent force as the authoritarian father, fighting the pugnacious kids in the back seat and the traffic on what we assume is a two-lane highway. He delves beautifully into the psyche of a lifetime Iowan, a history teacher for four decades, who wields a loving but firm hand over his family, as if they were his students.

As the loyal, steadfast wife and mother, who finally works up enough courage to vote with the kids, Brennan provides a fine counterpoint. Bennett balances her recalcitrant teenager with the snide grown-up she becomes.

The various daffy Iowans the family meets along the way are funneled into the hands of two performers — JJ Rodgers and Roy Abramsohn — who often take the play over the top from comedy into farce. Rodgers is best as a gabby truck stop waitress, while Abramsohn scores in a succession of goofy farmer roles.

John Berger's colorful, pastoral setting will make your mouth water for an ear of corn.

David Edwards' sound design — particularly of oncoming semi trucks — is tremendously effective, as are Paulie Jenkins' lighting effects and Dwight Richard Odle's middle America costumes.

You might not want to live there, but you'll have a great time "Leaving Iowa" at this inventive, skillfully executed nostalgic comedy.

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Leaving Iowa"

WHERE: Laguna Playhouse, 606 Laguna Canyon Road, Laguna Beach

WHEN: Tuesdays through Fridays at 8 p.m., Saturdays at 2 and 8, Sundays at 2 until Dec. 14

COST: \$25 to \$65

CALL: (949) 497-0787