

Theater review: "Leaving Iowa" *William Randall Beard*

Old Log Theatre's "Leaving Iowa" will elicit groans of recognition from anyone who has ever gone on a family car trip. It successfully exploits the comic possibilities of long overnight drives, endless stops at historical markers and crabby siblings arguing in the backseat. Add a plethora of bad Iowa jokes and it makes for an amusing and congenial evening. But this is a comedy with a more serious edge, giving the humor an even more satisfying resonance.

The script, by Tim Clue and Spike Manton, revolves around Don, a Boston journalist who returns to his hometown of Winterset, Iowa for a family visit and ends up on a road trip to fulfill his late father's final request. He is haunted by a childhood driving vacation to the exotic locale of Mark Twain's birthplace in Hannibal, Missouri. (His father rejects the Wisconsin Dells as "overpriced shenanigans.")

The play becomes a powerful exploration of the relationship of father and son. As the father, Old Log veteran Steve Shaffer has many opportunities for his trademark comedic style -- most notably trying to keep awake while driving late at night. But he demonstrates much more range than is usually required of him, making this nightmare version of an authoritarian patriarch vulnerable and sympathetic.

The heart of the production is in the performance of Terry Lynn Carlson as Don. He is quite funny as the young boy being tormented by his sister. But as the adult facing his guilt and making peace with the spirit of his recalcitrant father, he holds the stage with a quiet commitment that proves deeply affecting.

In the thankless role of the mother, Ellen Karsten demonstrates a passion and ferocity beyond the June Cleaver character that was written. And Jennifer Maren is almost too successful as Don's bratty little sister. Her tormenting her brother provokes a visceral reaction in the audience.

The production is directed by Clue, who proves to be a much better playwright. Much of his direction is unnecessarily frenetic and broad. He is particularly unfair to Fred J. Wagner, who is amazing in multiple roles, from a stereotypical Iowa farmer and a disgruntled grocery store clerk to a haughty Amish huckster and a dour restaurant worker. But his work is so over-the-top that he seems to be part of a different play.

In the end, the evening revolves around the relationship of father and son, which is genuine and believable, eschewing sentimentality for honest emotion. Come for the laughs and stay to be moved.

