

Arizona Daily Star

IT's 'Leaving Iowa' is a poignant and hilarious take on family trips

By Cathalena E. Burch

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Don Browning is on a mission.

He needs to spread his father's ashes at his grandparents' Iowa home.

Problem is, the home is gone, replaced by a grocery store.

It just doesn't seem right to leave Dad in aisle 7, next to the kitty litter.

So Don's predictable mission becomes a major adventure along the endlessly bucolic landscape of Iowa, where adventures are as hard to come by as steep hills.

Along the way, he recounts boyhood road trips with his history-obsessed, side-tripping father as he tries to find the most suitable resting place.

That's the premise of Tim Clue and Spike Manton's "Leaving Iowa," a poignantly touching and belly-bustingly funny story of family dynamics that Invisible Theatre is staging to open its 39th season. The story is told through seamlessly executed flashbacks that take us along with the Brownings on their "unpredictable" family vacations to exotic locales like Hannibal, Mo. The trips are always predictable: Dad drags them along to see historic markers and Civil War re-enactments, and Mom gets swooped up in a traveling Amish flea market.

The stage is simply set with boxes that the actors roll around to create different scenes — the family car, a counter at the diner, a hotel counter, an auto shop and a bar.

There's a serious risk here for the time-traveling to trip up the audience. But clever lighting and impeccably timed interruptions — Mom, Dad and Sis freeze in their tracks as Don flips midscene to current day — kept the action on track.

"Leaving Iowa" also could easily slip into sappy sentimentality, but director Susan Claassen, IT's longtime managing artistic director, was happily restrained. She allowed the mushy moments — like when Don breaks down in an out-of-the-way diner and weeps over the missed opportunity to attend his father's funeral — to evolve organically.

Don's diner outburst was the play's most dramatic moment. Most of the other action left Wednesday's nearly sold-out opening-night audience laughing like they were watching home movies from their own lives.

The humor in the hands of this cast never felt forced. David Johnston's father figure is the oblivious nerd, obsessed with passing every recreational vehicle on the highway and taking his family on history-seeking adventures that play out more like a dentist visit than a vacation.

Victoria McGee as Mom is sublimely understated, the perfect June Cleaver wannabe. On the rare occasions she raises her voice, everyone snaps to attention.

Roberto Guajardo brings a well-timed sense of humor to Don as he narrates the family's vacation slide show with deliciously funny asides, and Susan Kovitz is richly annoying as the pestering little sister. The two together are priceless true-to-life, particularly in the scene where Sis convinces Daddy that Don smacked her with his copy of Mark Twain short stories. Truth is she thumped him.

(Don't be embarrassed if you whisper to your neighbor, "That's my kids" or "That was me and my sister." It's easy to see yourself in these characters.)

But the runaway scene stealers throughout the production were Terry Erbe and Lori Hunt, who play at least a half-dozen characters — from the Brownings' grandparents to the car mechanic and his John Wayne-impersonating sidekick; diner cook and annoyingly chatty waitress; and hotel clerk and flirtatious hotel guest.

Erbe and Hunt deliciously exaggerated every back-road stereotype, from the hillbilly drawl to the bumbling, dumbstruck demeanor that defined most of those characters. Never once, though, did it come off as gratuitous or forced.

Review

"Leaving Iowa"

- Presented by: Invisible Theatre.
- Playwrights: Tim Clue and Spike Manton.
- Director: Susan Claassen.
- When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays; 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays; and 3 p.m. Sundays through Oct. 4.
- Where: Invisible Theatre, 1400 N. First Ave.
- Tickets: \$22-\$25, with rush tickets available for half-price a half-hour before curtain, if available.
- Information/reservations: 882-9721.

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Posted by William Dell at 6:34 AM