



Arts

By D.L. Groover Thursday, Aug 12 2010

Capsule Stage Reviews: Leaving Iowa

There's family entertainment playing at A.D. Players that's just about the best thing going.

Written by Chicago standup comedians Tim Clue and Spike Manton, this warmhearted comedy about family — the American family, to be precise — pulses with nostalgia, radiates soft charm and stays entertaining without running out of gas. Although it focuses on the classic summer road trip, where the kids whine nonstop in the backseat while Dad and Mom try to keep peace from the front, it's really about the undertow influence dads wield over their sons.

While driving his father's ashes back to his family home, Don (Chip Simmons) conjures up a family "adventure" one summer long ago. The family dynamics are there in the details and the finely wrought performances. You know almost everything about Dad (Ric Hodgins) just by the way he sits in the driver's seat, satisfied and sure, knowing and protective. With immense patience, Mom (Patty Tuel Bailey) keeps a loving vigil over her brood, finally erupting with justified rage when the kids really get on her nerves. Sis (Katherine Weatherly) is a princess and already knows just how to play her father.

Nothing momentous happens on the trip — or on Don's — but as in a miniature version of Thornton Wilder, it's the little things that'll be remembered later with such force. Along the way, the family encounters a host of characters straight out of American Gothic via '30s Hollywood screwball comedy — Civil War re-enactors, an Amish couple who are the ultimate capitalists, the odd, taciturn waiter and the equally garrulous one — all played by the wondrously inventive Lee Walker and Sarah Cooksey. Each manifestation gets funnier as the play goes on, and they get laughs just by appearing. The two give the play a lively framework upon which the family, and the grownup Don, interact.

Simmons, an A.D. regular, outdoes himself. No one seems so natural when acting — it's a rare gift. He is transcendent as the wayward son making amends with the father he once undervalued. And all of them, under Jennifer Dean's whispery direction, create that rare time in the theater: You watch transfixed and wonder what's going to happen next. And you aren't disappointed in the slightest.

Through August 29. 2710 W. Alabama, 713-526-2721.

— DLG