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# Arts and Entertainment

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## Day 2 of Futurefest gets to the heart of things

By Terry Morris | Sunday, July 27, 2008, 12:01 AM

“Heartland,” a play about persecution of German-Americans during World War II, emerged as a frontrunner for honors Saturday, July 26, in the Dayton Playhouse’s 18th annual Futurefest.

Set on a Wisconsin dairy farm in 1945, the two-act drama by Lauren Simon and Anita Simons brought a little known chapter of American wartime history to light.

A play that can do that has already succeeded on one level. This one also proved to have a satisfying emotional range, clear characters and relationships.

Presented at 10 a.m., it opened day two of the three-day, six-play festival with a cast including Becky Lamb as Berta, a German-born widow trying to run a family farm with her two daughters and young son.

Two German prisoners pressed into labor on the farm as part of a U.S. government program seem a godsend at first. But the way the two — Rolf (Micah Stock) and Gunther (James Goodwin) — blend so easily in with the family attracts the suspicions of closed-minded neighbors and the banker who holds the mortgage. The FBI arrives one night to haul Berta away to jail as a suspected spy and the family’s fortunes soon descend.

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“I thought the Nazis and Japs were our enemies, not our own government,” says eldest daughter Sonya (Allison Husko), who strives to hold onto the family home.

Director Linda Dunlevy’s casting and her actors’ convincing German accents were both effective, but the staging was an awkward mix of dramatic reading and free-ranging performance. Lines spoken downward into open scripts were sometimes lost.

Sweet romance blossoms between daughter Emma (Sarah Gomes) and Rolf. The cast also included John Bukowski as the banker, whose villainy prompted hisses from the audience, Stefanie Pratt as busybody Peggy and Casey Dayton Blunt as son Peter.

The matinee was a three-act and three-hour biodrama about American stage legend Laurette Taylor, who landed the role of Amanda in the Broadway premiere of “A Glass Menagerie” after many lean years of missed rent payments and heavy drinking.

Directed by Fran Pesch, “Yellow to Lavender” reflected playwright Carl Rossi’s passion for his subject, but proved to be mostly extended dialogue and very little action.

The worthy central relationship includes Taylor (Barbara Jorgensen) and the acting student who becomes almost a daughter to her (Devan Norsworthy as sweet Eloise Sheldon).

The edgiest play in the festival, Bill Hollenbach’s “Inside the Gatehouse,” filled the Saturday night slot.

tagged by Saul Caplan and Greg Hall, it depicts a quartet of privileged middle-aged folks who gather in their gated enclave for a night of socializing before they head out the next day to shoot and kill black bears.

But first they become the prey of unseen, amazingly adept vigilantes who disable the high-tech sanctuary and psycho-terrorize its occupants into some very uncivilized behavior. Along the way, the rulers-turned-captives drink to excess, confess considerable sins and brutalize each other to repetitious extreme.

It’s a setup with tense, horror-tinged promise, but “Inside the Gatehouse” doesn’t go anywhere. It introduces us to unlikable people and never gives us any reason to care about them.

As alpha-boor Art, Dave Williamson was a seething stereotype brought to erupting, type- A life. He verbally trashes his wife (Cheryl Mellen as Carol), gets his kicks driving golf balls right out his front door and bellows like a water buffalo at those who expose his folly. Geoff Burkman was Jackson, a voice of nervous reason until he revives a drinking problem. K.L. Storer was foul-mouthed Zipper, who ends up seeming tame compared to the others.

Futurefest will continue with two more plays on Sunday, July 27, at the Playhouse, 1301 E. Siebenthaler Ave. Tickets are \$16. Call (937) 424-8477.

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