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SIMONIC DIVERGENCE

Lost in Yonkers leaves the pack of fluffy Neil Simon
audience-pleasers and veers toward weightiness

by C. Jay Wilson Jr.



From left: Marco Gould, Karen Trumbo and Nicholas Winterfeld

The plays of Neil Simon very well may be to U.S. theater what *Reader's Digest* is to journalism.

As one of the stage's most prolific playwrights, Simon has become more or less a household name, which does not account for his plays' accessibility. That stems from the fact that he offers a blend of comedy with the consistency needed to draw audiences *en masse* to the theater. Simon's plays provide that which is

who has played a diverse array of roles in the past two seasons for Portland Rep. (e.g., a monkey, a plant and a New York socialite) is at the top of her form in her portrayal of Bella. It's true that she is given the play's most riveting role, with a show-stopping monologue in the second act, but she achieves an affecting characterization through her attentive rendering of the character's nuances of pathos. Trumbo's performance is assisted in part by the counteraction of the oppressive weight that Sterchi contributes to the play through her perfect realization of Grandma.

The two displaced children who come to live with their grandmother while their father is abroad working off a debt to pay for his wife's medical bills are competently played by Marco Gould and Nicholas Winterfeld, who exceeded my expectations in the level of theatrical skill that they brought to the roles. The boys' presence helps foster the lighthearted temper of the play, especially when the catalyst of William Harper's unctuous Uncle Louie, a low-level gangster stooge, is added to the action. Harper seems to have found his thespian niche in this particular role: I could almost detect the oily residue trailing him throughout his performance.

David Meyers is effectively painful to watch as the depleted father of the two boys who appeals to his callous mother at the opening of the play for the temporary housing of his sons. Equally painful to watch was the facial grimacing of Mary McDonald-Lewis as Gert. One of the afflicted progeny under Grandma's cold reign, Gert suffers from a severe breathing disorder that becomes aggravated primarily in her mother's troubling presence.

Despite the play's serious subject matter, Simon packages it all up with a smile. We sense that as he approaches the core of the issues that lie at the play's heart in typical Simon fashion he lifts us swiftly onto more breezy stretches of comic relief. His resolves within the plot are reached without too much fuss, and all of the characters reflect the optimism that they will go on to live harmonious lives in courageous defiance of their unearthed demons.

Theatergoers, having tapped into some of the themes of that shared universal struggle, can leave comforted that they have glimpsed into an existential mirror and in the process have shared in a good laugh.

Lost in Yonkers runs through Feb. 15. Tickets for Tuesday through Thursday shows are \$25, Friday and Saturday shows are \$27; tickets are available from the Rep.'s box office at 224-4491, or charge by phone at TicketMaster, 224-4400.

Theater

palatable to an overwhelming majority of theater-going audiences: realistic theater with lots of laughs, zany characterizations and—for less cynical patrons over the age of 40—nostalgia. Although many of his plays tend to offer fodder for situation comedy scenarios by delving into the complexities of human relationships and resurfacing before they get too deep, Simon is indeed a masterful craftsman of the genre. Mamet or Shepard he ain't—still, no one would argue that he hasn't achieved an honorable position at the nation's theater table.

Portland Repertory Theater has staged what is perhaps Simon's most incisive comedy, the 1991 Pulitzer and Tony award-winning *Lost in Yonkers*. The qualities that one has come to expect from a Neil Simon play are all in place here—it's chock-full of innocuous humor and still very much immersed in nostalgia—but at the heart of this play is an honest portrayal of the familial rift promoted by the conflicting psychological desires for maternal nurturing and an ever-strengthening emotional independence. *Lost in Yonkers* features some of Simon's most compelling dialogue and, Felix and Oscar notwithstanding, offers up a few of his most memorable characters. Under the competent direction of Dennis Bigelow, Portland Rep. has put together an agreeable production.

At the center of the play stands a tough-as-nails matriarch (Grandma) who has governed the family's hearth with the hard-fisted vigor of a third-world dictator. Her children all cower in the shadow of her fearful legacy and have consequently carried into their adulthood the still-festering emotional wounds. The only offspring left living in the house with her mother is Bella, a woman whose cerebral faculties haven't fully blossomed—she has the mind (and heart) of a child. The two characters were both deftly handled by seasoned actors, Karen Trumbo in the role of Bella and Gaynor Sterchi as Grandma. Trumbo,