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THEATER BY SARA BRICKNER

A Tale for the Times

Fifth of July dredges up Vietnam.

At first, it's not obvious that Lanford Wilson's *Fifth of July* is a testament to the aftermath of Vietnam. The play, set on a porch in a small town, relies heavily on the dialogue and interaction between characters to examine the long-term impact of the Vietnam war and the 1960s in general.

Without a believable family dynamic, *Fifth of July* would fail. It takes subtlety and finesse to develop the characters and make them real. The Actor's Cabaret crew delivers again, embracing their roles as flawed human beings, attempting to hide their personal sorrows behind dry remarks and pills downed with wine.

The play opens with Kenny (Benjamin Newman), a Vietnam vet-turned-teacher with fiberglass legs, listening to an indecipherable tape made by a speech-impaired student. It is one of the few moments in which any character is alone onstage. There are no real monologues, which make the chemistry between the characters of paramount importance.

First we see the relationship between Kenny and Jed, his botanist lover (Jesse Lally). Their relationship is fragile, fluctuating between wounded tenderness and cautious distance. Kenny has returned to his hometown of Lebanon, Mo. but hasn't decided if he wants to remain in Lebanon, the house, or the teaching profession.

Jed and Kenny's relationship contrasts

sharply with the superficial, even deceitful interactions between John (Ryan Olson) and Gwen (Becky White). Kenny and his sister, June (Emily Gilbert), are allies in their disgust of John's arrogance and Gwen's air-headed naïveté, exchanging many knowing looks and artfully creating a semblance of ease and familiarity.

Sue Schroeder-White shines in her role as Aunt Sally, a wise, eccentric aunt who has seen a UFO and keeps her husband's ashes in the refrigerator. Shirley (Samantha White), June's daughter is an aspiring artist who makes a good poster child for adolescent angst. But at times her melodramatic declarations cross into the ridiculous, making it difficult to tell whether or not the drama is deliberate. Wes (Michael Watkins) is an outsider brought to Lebanon by John and Gwen, a well-meaning stoner observing from the sidelines.

At first, we don't know why all these people are there. Then the conflicts emerge, leading to an inevitable confrontation. The climax of the production is raw, a dramatic scene that offers the last bits of information needed to piece together the history. With good portrayals of complex characters by a strong cast, *Fifth of July* makes a powerful statement about the impact of the Vietnam war and examines how the aftermath of war endures in the people who have experienced it. *Fifth of July* is playing through Feb. 12, 2005 at the ACE Annex. **EW**



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