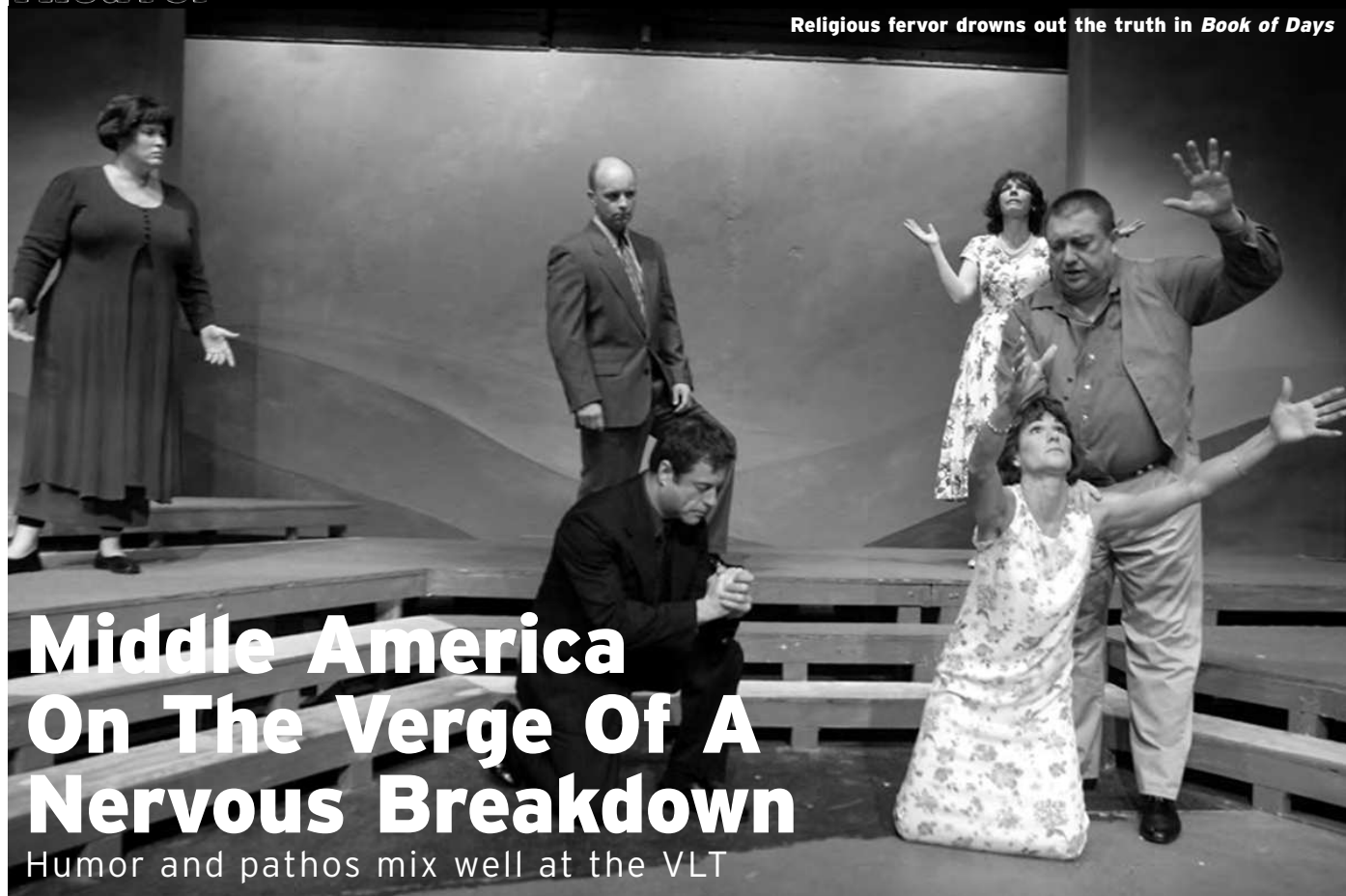


Religious fervor drowns out the truth in *Book of Days*



JOHN BAUGUES

Middle America On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown

Humor and pathos mix well at the VLT

The Very Little Theater's production of *Book of Days* starts with the entire cast onstage rattling off short descriptions and anecdotes about Dublin, Missouri (pronounced Miz-ZUR-Uh), where the action takes place. We learn the town is far from any metropolitan area (the closest city is Springfield, population 151,580), but a tide of strip mall commercialism and urban progressiveness has been lapping at its shores for some time now, eating at its morals from the inside-out so that even the town's reverend has a spit-shined glow but is rotten at his core. Part *The Laramie Project*, part *Dogville*, Lanford Wilson's *Days* offers a panoramic portrait of Middle America struggling with theological complacency on the one hand and a common sense worldview on the other. The result is a fine blend of laugh-out-loud humor and deep-seated tragedy.

It's no coincidence the townsfolk are called Dubliners, a nod to their fleshed-out Joycian undertones. The play may give Ruth Hoch (Shawne Crow) and James Bates (Mike Hawkins) the most narrative juice, but every character has his or her desires. There's Len (Tom Wilson), Ruth's

husband, who wants the cheese plant he works for to start making slow-aged gourmet cheese rather than selling off curds to Kraft. Walt Bates (Alan Aldrich), the cheese plant owner and town patriarch, is drawn to Len's plan, if only out of a desire to re-create the Provolone cheese (and romance) he tasted on his honeymoon in Italy 30 years ago. There's Lou Ann Bates (Mary DeLorenzo), obsessed with making her husband, James, confess his overt adultery before the church, while the Reverend Bobby Groves (a pitch-perfect, plastic-smiling Kevin Crowe) tells her to be a "good wife" and let the matter drop.

Then there's Boyd Middleton (LCC theater student Kory Weimer), a slick Los Angeles bohemian who will guest-direct the community theater's production of George Bernard Shaw's *Saint Joan*, and who casts Ruth in the lead. Like it or not, Middleton becomes the symbol of the immoral intrusion on Dublin's soil — or soul — that begins with a seemingly harmless play about a woman's crusade against church dogma and ends with Sheriff Conroy Atkins (Barry G. Carroll) threatening Middleton, asking the director to leave

the town in peace. "For crying out loud," reasons Middleton, "it's George Bernard Shaw! Nobody is offended by Shaw!" Nobody in urban America, he means.

It's unfortunate that Walt, one of the more lively characters, is killed off barely a third into the play, thus leaving a hole in the cast — but to much effect. We long for the return of Walt, perhaps as a phantom à la *Hamlet*. But death, Wilson assures us, is final, making murder the most heinous offense. It's maddening, then, when Dubliners play down the death to preserve their fragile existence. This is where Ruth, who chooses to keep focusing on the details that don't add up, is given her Joan of Arc moment. Sensing her historical precedent, she duly gets burned.

Wilson frequently employs asides, flashbacks, reruns, jump cuts and other metanarratives to give the play a breath of cinematic air, allowing it to give nuggets of information in a nonlinear, disjointed fashion that — thanks to fine choreography from director Richard Scheeland and a superb lighting design by Amanda Ferguson — transitions smoothly from one cut to the next. In perhaps the play's largest

step outside of itself, one scene has Elaine Slatore (playing Sharon Bates) refusing to reenact a flashback scene where she let loose a flurry of curses and accusations after learning of her husband's hunting accident, insisting she "never said it like that," so Leslie Murray (playing Ginger) steps in and gloriously plays the scene for her. Wilson is saying we must remove ourselves into the artificial world of theater (or any type of fiction) in order to tell the Truth with a capital T, a grand gesture towards the arts with powerful commentary on our current state of the union.

Book of Days is a play about staying loyal to reality, to details, to truth — even if it brings about the much-dreaded C-word: change. While the message is not groundbreaking nor scathing (Wilson wrote it in late 1999), the VLT's production comes at a timely historical crossroads at what many predict will be our country's darkest period. Will we side with reality or convenience? Will we continue to get truth from CNN and Truth from Comedy Central? When we say a change of course is needed, do we mean it, or are we just saying it? **EW**

Opening Nights

THE WOMAN IN BLACK

Opens Fri., Jan. 26 at Cottage Theatre in Cottage Grove. You know those urban legends where a dead woman haunts a house and maybe a town and then leaves her hook on the car door of the lovers making out at the Point? Well, OK, this play isn't exactly like that. But it does have tales within tales and mystery and, well, a ghostly, haunty, apparently terrifying chica wearing, well, black. Head down to Cottage Grove to check out the production. Show dates are Jan. 26-28 and Feb. 2-4 & 9-10. Call 942-8001 for tickets.

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