

Life's Lessons, Over Lust and Liver

Neil Simon's classic *Brighton Beach Memoirs* at LCC

Chores to do, girls to figure out, a mother to avoid and an imaginary World Series to win; Eugene Morris Jerome has got a lot on his plate. Add the slab of liver he's required to take two more bites of and you have *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, author Neil Simon's masterful depiction of his youth in 1930s New York City.

Eugene's working-class Jewish family cramped into a Brooklyn walkup is a far remove from the verdant, let-it-all-hang-out environs of Eugene, Ore., but the issues he deals with are familiar. This 15-year-old boy with big dreams narrates his life amidst a family straining under the weight of tragedy and tough economic times. The Student Productions Association production of *Brighton Beach Memoirs* opens in the midst of the Jewish High Holy days, just after Rosh Hashanah, a day of introspection. If Eugene isn't exactly casting off his sins, he's definitely sharing them with us.

And they're hysterical. Simon's humor in *Brighton Beach Memoirs* is at its best because it's so real and immediate. Who hasn't had a month when one trouble piles atop the next, and who doesn't know a quick-witted teenage boy with a penchant for mischief? The family dynamic in this play shapes every interaction; when Eugene "decided to go downstairs and quiet (his) passion with an oatmeal cookie," his mother — in the middle of serious family drama and discussion — can still hear him get into the cookie jar a room away, and busts him for it. That's life.

As is often the case with LCC's Student Production Association, several experienced actors are drafted to round out the cast, the idea being that students can learn by working with them, and directors can anchor a production. It's a practice with some merit, though in this instance the adults are shown up by the students. Joseph Tanner Paul as Eugene and Johnny Rogers as his big brother Stanley are the chatter of the lobby. Their timing, movement and authenticity create a magic you don't want to miss.

The second act slows considerably as the weight of the world threatens the life of the family. Everyone, even the adults, has to grow up. As Eugene rips out the one-liners and soaks up the sympathy, two incredibly



difficult female characters are quietly shaping the action. Actor Darlene Morton subtly captures the slowly emerging strength of Blanche, a heartbroken and widowed aunt. And Elizabeth Peterson knocks out her role as Eugene's mother, backing Kate's overstrained, quick-mouthed tension with the deepest love for her family.

James McConky's massive, two-story

set makes a perfect backdrop for the family drama, and costume designer Mari DeWitt's 1930s attire is just shabby enough. Accents, particularly those as far away and specific as a Jewish family in Brooklyn, are always difficult. Most actors in this production choose an understated dialect that gives validity to Simon's dialogue without distracting from it. Occasionally, move-

ment *did* distract, as some of the more tense moments seemed to devolve into the click of heels across the stage floor, forcing me to remember that these were actors trying to heighten drama, rather than people arguing through a life crisis.

I don't know when I've seen such an enthusiastic audience. And while there was a lot of opening-night love flowing back and forth, I can't imagine other audiences won't react in the same way. Okay, maybe the sound design (Swing on, Chris White!) won't receive specific applause in the future, but this show is a crowd pleaser.

If you grew up in the '80s, you probably came to know *Brighton Beach Memoirs* at an age when the plight of Nora and the antics of Eugene spoke to you. Returning to this play 28 years after it opened on Broadway — perhaps as an adult who has crossed the divide, shouldered burdens and maybe even called out an oatmeal cookie hidden in her son's pocket — *Memoirs* will prove even more meaningful.

Simon's work still stands, as powerful as ever. Brighton Beach may be a world away, but the story of a family trying to love each other during the hardest of times is always with us.

Brighton Beach Memoirs runs through Oct. 15 at Lane Community College; info & tickets at www.lanec.edu

Smart Ass, Sans Toga

Gutenberg College stages local playwright's *Socrates v America*

What possible business could McMansions, frat boys, hemlock and ancient Greek philosophers have being on stage together? Plenty, if you take the trial of Socrates and drop it into present-day America. And, truly, who wouldn't want to hear that wizened old wit's scathing commentary of modern life?

Gutenberg professor Timothy A. McIntosh was inspired to update the story of Plato's apology for the trial of Socrates after watching a performance of another academic's similar work.

"It was dreadful!" says McIntosh, who performs regularly in local community theaters. "When people come to see a play, they want to see a play, not a book."

McIntosh's goal was to create a play that would make Plato's classic "really approachable and enjoyable for someone who might otherwise be intimidated."

Previous works by McIntosh include several other modern takes on classics, such as *P.R.*, a pop opera based on *The Misanthrope*, and *Hell, Purgatory, & Heaven: A Walking Tour*, based on Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

"I think students will appreciate this because Socrates is just so well spoken," McIntosh says, noting that Socrates' message of people being individuals responsible for their own actions will resonate with intelligent high-school and college students (while reminding the rest of us that we're responsible for having gotten into this mess!).

Gutenberg alumni, professors and guest artists make up the quirky cast. Socrates will be served up with the traditional Gutenberg dinner, no sandals or togas required. — *Anna Grace*

Socrates v America runs 7pm Saturday & Sunday, Oct. 8-16, & Thurs.-Fri., Oct. 13-14, at Gutenberg College, 1883 University St.; \$10 play & dinner, res. at 683-5141.

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