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CAVEMAN LIVES, LEARNS

VLT presents quiet sci-fi thriller *The Man From Earth*

John Oldman is either a “caveman, a liar or a nut.” A tenure-track professor quite suddenly announces his departure from the university where he has comfortably taught for 10 years. His fellow professors insist on the ritual of cheese, crackers and a proper going away, only to have their party ruined when John works up the courage to tell them the truth. He is 14,000 years old. He never ages, never dies and has been adrift in the world since the late Paleolithic age, learning about himself as the world comes to understand its own history.

An evening that begins with the room full of professors alternately laughing at John and skewering him with questions turns tragic as their comfortable notions of life, family and religion are overturned by the sad and almost believable tale of living for 14,000 years.

The Man From Earth is the final work of Jerome Bixby, a writer for the original *Star Trek* and *The Twilight Zone* series. He conceived the story in the 1960s and finished it just before he died in 1998. Richard Schenkman directed the 2007 film and adapted the story for stage.

The Man From Earth is Jay Hash’s directorial debut and a challenging one at that. This is a tough script. It takes place in one sparse living room, it is relentlessly talky and there are marginally funny jokes peppered throughout that would be hard for a seasoned director to make work. Add to this a snowstorm in Eugene; Hash and his crew were the only play to forge ahead on Friday night, showing to stalwart, puffy-coated audiences of 12 or 13 patrons.

Thus it was no surprise that the evening was off to a rocky start. The first scene is intentionally awkward, and it is hard to pinpoint a culprit for the long silences. But as the story takes shape, the audience begins to lean in, completely riveted. The idea, an eternal trek through the development of the Western world, is so compelling that what is, essentially, an evening of watching people sit in chairs and talk is completely fascinating.

Much of the credit can be placed on the shoulders of David Mort as the central character, John Oldman. Mort’s Paleolithic leftover was remarkably sage — calm and resigned to his lot in life, but with humor and hope.

The remainder of the cast has a wide range of experience. Out of the group come some really fine performances. Claude Offenbacher was strong as an older psychology professor teetering on an abyss of despair. As the anthropologist who most wants to believe, Blake Beardsley’s Dan brought energy when the script threatened to flag. Jennifer Sellers gives a powerful performance and particularly shines in the second act as the conversation questions the religious convictions of her character.

Great science fiction isn’t about special effects and fabulous alien animations. Great science fiction challenges our notions of what is possible. It is the exploration of an idea, like what if a man really *did* live forever. In press materials, Hash speaks of how science fiction can be “Thought-provoking instead of cheap. Profound instead of laughable.” That certainly applies to this production of *A Man From Earth*. ■

The Man From Earth runs through Dec. 15 at The Very Little Theatre, Stage Left; \$10.

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