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UD players serve up an evening of sophisticated hilarity

Coward's 'Hay Fever' proves sustained silliness is great fun

By TOM BUTLER

Special to The News Journal

Noel Coward's 1924 play "Hay Fever" is often promoted as "a comedy of bad manners."

While Bliss family members are certainly self-centered, much of the real comedy springs from the conflicting views of "reality" held by the extremely theatrical clan and four very ordinary houseguests.

John Going's production of "Hay Fever" for the University of Delaware's Resident Ensemble Players makes much of this chasm of comprehension. An excellent ensemble turns Coward's silly dialogue and wild sight gags into an evening of sophisticated and hilarious comedy.

The author assembles a crew of extremely self-absorbed people, all horribly unaware of the needs or sensibilities of the others. Judith Bliss (Kathleen Pirkel Tague), the mother, is a recently retired stage actress. Her husband, David (Stephen Pelinski), is a novelist. Their son and daughter have been reared by people fonder of their art and their "public" than of their children.

Those adult children are equally immune to normal notions of hospitality or even civility. This could make for pretty grim stuff if the Blisses were not so engagingly crazy.

Tague gives Judith exactly the right blend of obliviousness and artistic verve to make this madwoman beguiling. She shifts from remembered dialogue from an aging melodrama to improvised melodrama based on actual events in the blink of her flashing eyes. She never fails to keep the

audience laughing at her antics and their impact on the befuddled guests.

Sarah Dandridge and Michael Gotch play the Bliss children and capture the Bohemian peccadilloes of kids reared in public by publicity-hungry parents. Both excel at conveying the abject silliness of the characters but also manage to exude real elegance when it is demanded.

The houseguests are wonderfully dim and vulnerable to the peculiarities of their hosts.

Sara Valentine as the young guest of the father adopts the demeanor of a frightened bird as she flutters about and tries hopelessly to engage in conversation with a worldly diplomat (Mic Matarrese). She gets more laughs from silence and a vacuous stare than most actors can from a great punch line.

Cameron Knight plays a young athlete smitten with Judith. He gets good service from his working-class accent and fine sense of timing. The final guest, a vamp played by Carine Montbertrand, takes that term seriously. Montbertrand struts about with her pelvis thrust forward, using "sex like a shrimping net."

Michele Tauber, the cigarette-smoking maid of all work (and Judith's dresser from her days in the theater), makes the stock comic-servant role a real treat, intimidating the guests and her employers.

The action moves from parlor games that feature people trying to act out adverbs to flirtatious entanglements that Judith construes as fodder for her acting skills. At one point, she moves from delusional romantic intrigues to reciting the actual dialogue from "Love's Whirlwind," one of her florid stage successes.

The kids, of course, join right in. The guests wisely flee. But not before they execute some riotous pantomime work around the breakfast buffet table.

The mood in "Hay Fever" rarely rises above silly, but sustained silliness can be very persuasive.

The set, by David Russell, is an elaborate two-level affair filled with shabby-chic furnishings. A very lifelike portrait of Tague as Judith holds center stage. Posters for some of her stage triumphs grace the walls. Junghyun Georgia Lee dresses the cast lavishly in regal period costumes that give solidity to the action. And the incidental Noel Coward music adds an extra bit of charm.

The Resident Ensemble Players have picked a fine finale for their initial season.

Additional Facts

IF YOU GO

WHAT: "Hay Fever" by Noel Coward

WHERE: University of Delaware's Resident Ensemble Players,
Wilhelmina Press Thompson Theatre, Roselle Center for the Arts,
Orchard Road at Kent Way, Newark.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. May 8, 15, 16; 2 p.m. May 9, 10, 16.

ADMISSION: Evenings. \$20, students \$12; matinees \$16, students \$7.

FOR MORE INFO: 831-2204 or www.udel.edu/theatre
