

Berkshire Bright Focus...

How to Pray, by Michelle Carter.

Directed by John Sowle.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman.



"...the kind of person you assumed you might always become."

At the beginning of Michelle Carter's play, "How to Pray," a young woman named Faith is encouraging a dying 90-year-old man named Frank to face a few truths. He was her mother's boss and her lover when Faith was still a child and now he is suffering with cancer, a morphine drip and nicotine withdrawal and trying to understand Faith's place in his life. This is the opening scene of what is, really, an emotionally, psychologically and deeply personal comedy about a woman in a surrogate pregnancy that has gone awry. In the hands of three very talented actors in this Bridge Street Theatre production in Catskill, NY, the show is very funny. . .and more than a bit touching.

I had heard that the play was about the dignity of surrogacy, but it is not. It is about choices and circumstances and learning about yourself - who you are and why and what for. It is about finding a way to touch your own emotional base without ending up in a looney bin and at the same time finding faith in yourself and your very personal God. The heroine of this play has not been very much in touch with herself. Her pets are never really her own. Her boyfriends are virtually non-existent unless they present a problem that troubles Faith more than her own struggles do. Her best friend is a pre-op transgendered woman who nurtures a dream of songstress-stardom as a blues chanteuse. Her own brother has betrayed her faith in him and in helping a couple in pregnancy distress. This is a woman with a lot of reasons to find the salvation of prayer, but sadly she has never learned how to pray, how to make meaningful her needs in thought and solo expression.

Susan Slotoroff plays Faith with admirable charm, grace, tension and a resolute spirit. She is virtually never off stage and her journey through her memories of childhood, her attitudes in work and in volunteerism, her friendships and her romances, her remarkable ability to consult with her pets on their feelings and her loyalty to those who are nice to her, helps her find answers as no other pilgrim on a voyage of discovery ever has before. There are subtleties to Faith's changes along the way. Slotoroff fells great trees of resistance within those nuanced shifts and, remarkably, no detritus falls on by-standers or wayfarers. She deftly manages the shifts of mood and attitude. Her portrayal of this complex creature named Faith provides us the opportunity to learn what it means to finally give way to that emotional need to reach out to the infinite.

Along the way she gives herself to her brother, to a lover, to his young son, to her cat and her dog and a client turned co-worker. She shares the best sides of her nature with strangers. Six of these are played by Morgan Hooper. He is a good-looking man who can be sweet, sardonic and silly with equal success. His Clergyman is a wonderful character, completely sincere and at the same time seductively motivating. He plays the young son of her lover with deliciously childlike tones and he plays the boy's father with a complexity that is ultimately devastating.

In a taped cameo Roxanne Fay adds a dimension about surrogacy that is just enough over-the-top to make the attitudes of the "rich and powerful" explicitly damning.

However, as good as everyone else is in this play, Steven Patterson runs away with the acting honors. His three principal roles are the heart of the piece. He is Frank, the 90-year-old man whose insensitivity sparks so much in Faith. Patterson gives him an evil demeanor tempered with dementia and soothed by drugs that is as direct a portrayal of a man who has outlived his ability to be the bad guy as I have ever seen. A few minutes later he introduces us to Cat, the pet cat Faith converses with constantly as she tries to make him understand that her newly adopted stray dog is not a threat to their own relationship. Cat is a retread, in a way, of Frank. This animal cannot be controlled and cannot be affectionate. Demanding and self-splendid Cat is a continually triumphant beast who requires little other than complete devotion and compliance to his wishes. Patterson is wonderful as Cat.

He is almost as good, and certainly much funnier as Dog in a brilliant scene which involves every part of the theater. His real triumph, though, is Judi Boswell, a down and out recipient of public welfare who harbors dreams of greatness and glamour and who achieves every wish with Faith at her side. The delicate surprises in this role come as no surprise, ultimately, and Patterson's transitions as Judi are little other than brilliant.

Directed by John Sowle, who also designed the fine set and superb lighting with costumes by Michelle Rogers and sound by Carmen Borgia, this play is a wow! One of the best ensemble shows of the season, its relatively short run deserves sold-out houses and nothing less.