

A unique and relevant play opens at Town Hall Theatre

By Sophie Braccini



From left: Suzie Shepard and Erin Gould in "Woman in Mind"

Photos Jay Yamada

“Woman In Mind” is a 1980s play that tells the story of a frustrated housewife who finds relief from her dull and emotionally deprived existence in a fantasy world where she has invented a parallel family that has a life of its own, and will finally submerge her sanity. The play, which runs through March 24 at Town Hall Theatre, provides spectators with many moments of lightness and humor on the dark backdrop of a mental breakdown. It is served up by a remarkable group of actors.

Written in 1985 by prominent contemporary British playwright Alan Ayckbourn, known for writing many plays about marriages and also for experimenting with different forms on the stage, “Woman in Mind” has the particularity of being written entirely from the perspective of Susan, the housewife. Dennis Markam, who directs the play at Town Hall, says that this is one of the reasons he wanted to present this work in Lafayette; he believes it is the only play of its kind.

The play takes place in Susan’s garden – very lovely scenic design, in her presence only, and we see what she thinks. There is no explanation, no commentary about what is happening to her; the audience has to figure it out. This is where knowing where the play is going, in fact, helps in appreciating it.

It all starts as the story of a frustrated housewife who uses benign and rosy, soap opera-like day-dreaming to compensate for the lack of emotional fulfillment she gets in her real life. But slowly, the fantasy takes control of her reality, and she tips into madness.

The way Susan loses ground, unable to control her daydreaming, becoming controlled by it, transitions very slowly, but with great mastery.

There are Freudian accents to the play. Susan is frustrated emotionally, but she is also sexually

deprived. When she confronts her cold and boring clergyman of a husband on the topic he answers that he thought that after a certain age, meaning menopause, women just lose interest. Her fantasy with her dreamed-husband takes on a very erotic turn – “sleeping with the devil” – just before the tipping point of her folly.

While the subject of the play is dramatic, spectators laugh constantly. The group of actors that were selected to embody the characters holds the success of the play. They are all excellent. Suzie Shepard as Susan brings her natural exuberance to the role and adds all the nuances of despair and anger that it demands. She is on stage from the first minute to the last, in her average dress and sad sweater, a powerful presence.

All the actors revolving around her are perfectly cast. Erin Gould embodies the funny, touching and clumsy doctor, who brings a touch of real humanity into Susan’s life. Gretchen Lee Salter is the annoying live-in sister-in-law. She brings the annoyance to an almost palpable level and adds some surprises at the end. Michael Sally plays the boring and insensitive husband perfectly, giving him no redeeming quality. Domonic Tracy as Susan’s son has a smaller role but adds his touch of lack of compassion to Susan’s deadly paradigm. The fictional family of Craig Souza, Tim Holt Jones and Brooke Silva, with their shallow soap lives and colorful attire, become increasingly and tactfully menacing.

The play does not hit too far from home. Susan’s mental imagery and the way it takes control of her life could be a metaphor for today’s prescription pill epidemic among mothers reported in Parents Magazine or The Washington Post.

“Woman In Mind” plays at THT until March 24. For more information and tickets go to www.townhalltheatre.com/woman-in-mind/.



From left: Brooke Silva and Suzie Shepard in "Woman in Mind"

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