

Lab Theater's 'Miss Witherspoon' big on laughs and strong performances



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Miss Witherspoon opened this weekend at the **Laboratory Theater of Florida**. Directed by Artistic Director Annette Trossbach, the play was marked by a stunning performance by Stephanie Davis in the lead role of Veronica a/k/a Miss Witherspoon that was made all the more outstanding by the strong, albeit preposterously exaggerated, roles deftly handled by the rest of the *Witherspoon* cast.

The audience meets Veronica as she converses on the phone with an unseen, unheard friend, and we quickly learn that the middle-aged nihilist is not only done with men (as one of Rex Harrison's many ex-wives, who can blame her), she's "kind of done with everything." She blames her psychotically depressive mental and emotional bearing on the state of the world, explaining ... or perhaps proclaiming ... that she's always found it rather impossible to "get on the hope bandwagon." Convinced by falling chunks of Skylab and an errant encounter with Henny Penny that the world is ending soon anyway, she decides why wait, and takes the suicide train to the afterlife where she hopes she can channel her inner Greta Garbo and be left alone once and for all. Alas, it's not to be, and the distraught-trending-toward-histrionic Veronica spends the next two-thirds of the play trying to derail ensuing reincarnations designed to teach her life lessons that will polish and brighten her dim and tarnished aura.

It's a good thing Christopher Durang is so accomplished, because if he'd been a first-time playwright looking for a Manhattan literary agent, his script would have been rejected out of

hand for violating today's literary mantra of "show, don't tell." Veronica's opening scene is one long, snarky, sardonic siloquay which Davis uses to perfection to win the sympathies of the audience - which is saying a lot given that Veronica is a self-absorbed, self-indulgent, sniping bitch. And we feel all the sorrier for her when we discover along with her that she must now endure the unending platitudes and pontifications of her spiritual guide in the Bardo (Purgatory), Maryamma, brilliantly played by Gerrie Benzing who is making her Lab Theater debut. Benzing's perpetual smile and condescending cheeriness is so grating that the audience quickly finds itself rooting for Witherspoon to embark upon a new life, no matter how horrible, just to escape the Bardo and the insufferable Maryamma's lessons.

Benzing is not the only one who enables Davis to shine like the sun by providing contrastingly dark or reflective personifications. Kathleen Moyer is a hoot in the alternate roles of reincarnated Witherspoon's doting upper class and chain-smoking, fat-assed abusive trailer trash mothers. Aided by an array of wigs, costume changes, and make-up, Rob Green handles the roles of Father 1, Father 2, dog owner, sleazy drug dealer and Gandolf the Wise (yes, that Gandolf) with such aplomb that some members of the audience didn't realize it was the same actor until the Valspar chameleons spilled the paint. And while the audience's first meeting with Yvonne Shadrach is as a subdued and flummoxed teacher of an addled and abused Witherspoon, her portrayal of Jesus in a dress and fancy hat steals the final scene, in which the title character not only learns that our actions have consequences both for us and those we interact with in even the tiniest of ways, but that *au contraire* to Franz Kafka and Albert Camus, life does have meaning and is worth living to the fullest, today, tomorrow and the all the days of our lives.

And that, after all, is the lesson that Christopher Durang wants the audience to learn through the tortuous trials and tribulations of his Miss Witherspoon. He signals this denouement near the end of the first scene, when he has Henny Penny/Chicken Licken (Kathleen Moyer) run across the stage screaming that "the sky is falling" as bits and pieces of Skylab flash in Earth's upper atmosphere during its re-entry. While it's tempting to draw analogies to all the fear-mongering, End Times profits of doom (hello Glenn Beck and Michele Bachmann), the message of the fable (which dates back 25 centuries) is not that life is worth living, but that our challenge is to face life with courage.

But the genius in Christopher Durang's writing is that *Miss Witherspoon* is susceptible to many interpretations.

"It isn't often that one finds a comedy that has universal and generally-thought-of-as serious themes like karma and the collective consciousness which is presented in a light and fun and delightful way as is *Miss Witherspoon*," notes director Annette Trossbach. "As snarky and sarcastic as Veronica is, she and her straight-man, Maryamma, are teaching us about the evolution of our souls and how all of us are interconnected. And I love that, woven into the balance of comic routine and deep thoughts about reincarnation, we have the running Rex Harrison/*My Fair Lady* gag. Durang's writing is smart and hilarious and just a delight! He's in a league of his own."

But perhaps at its core, *Miss Witherspoon* give us the room to lightheartedly examine our individual beliefs about what lies beyond the portal of death.

"It was everything I had been thinking about during those days, final months with my mom," shares Stephanie Davis, whose mother passed last March at the age of 70. "My mom was an agnostic and I was so worried about what would happen to her when she died. I'd never really thought about it before. *Miss Witherspoon* gave me hope. It made me feel better about my mom. I still don't have it all figured out, but it resonated with me during a time when I was seeking answers."

Which, perhaps, explains why Davis' performance as *Miss Witherspoon* resonates with the audience. Because of her own life lessons, she is able to wrench from deep within her own soul thoughts, feelings and philosophical truths that all of us entertain and eventually experience, no matter how long or hard we try to avoid the inevitable.

There are seven more performance of *Miss Witherspoon*, on October 17, 18, 19, 24, 25 and 26 at 8 p.m. and a 2 p.m. matinee on October 20. Treat yourself. You'll chortle. You'll chuckle. You'll laugh right out loud. Because in spite of the serious content, *Miss Witherspoon* is at its core a comedy and Stephanie Davis is drolly funny.

The Laboratory Theater is located at 1634 Woodford Avenue in the Fort Myers **River District**. To purchase tickets in advance, please visit www.laboratorytheaterflorida.com or telephone 239-218-0481.

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