

THEATER NOTES By Sidney B. Simon

COURAGEOUS THEATER

The Laboratory Theater of Florida is where you find cutting edge and courageous theater. Annette Trossbach, the Artistic Director, has brought to us over the years the richest and sometimes rarest evenings of theater Ft. Myers has been privileged to see. It is Community Theater at its best.

One of those is Arthur Kopit's "Wings." It's a play that won a host of awards in 1970. "Wings" was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize that year and was nominated for a Tony Award as Best Play, plus it gained the prestigious Drama Desk award.

Under Ms. Trossbach's excellent direction, the play is alive with painful poignancy. She has assembled a cast that brought top flight performances to the evening some of them in double roles. The astounding sound and the lights, the costumes, all added to a very professional production.

Now, what was the play about? It's about a woman who was part of an aerial circus barnstorming act, back in the late 30's or so. She was a "Wing Walker," hanging onto wires as the plane climbed, and spiraled, and dove to enthrall thousands of screaming fans on the ground. That tells you something vital about her.

The play takes us to a later time when she has a totally debilitating stroke. Her life with all the damage a stroke can bring and her recovery is the play. It starts with her losing memory, her speech, hearing, almost everything that serious brain damage brings.

Cindy Chase brings a wide theatrical experience to the role of Emily Stilson, once a daredevil, now a medical tragedy. Much of the play is a monologue of her struggle to regain the life she once lived. In the beginning her mouthings are just gibberish, not easy to deliver, but Ms. Chase pulls it off. We meet the numerous people from the medical profession assigned to her. Some helpful, and some a lot less so.

The play was very personal to Arthur Kopit. He watched his own father go through a stroke which took his life. Some of the caretakers he creates came out of his observations. Reality shows that some caretakers don't really care, or don't know how to help.

The play is raw. It confronts, and it is sometimes depressing. As Emily fights, with the same spirit that kept her holding on to the wires on the airplanes, there are ribbons of wit and insight that give us hope as she works towards that woman she was, the one with a lust for life. She gets some of the finest help from a doctor, Amy, played beautifully by Kate Dirrigi. Steven Coe, playing Billy, one of the wild ones in the rehab group, brought some sunshine, too. One of my Lab Theater favorites, Louise Wigglesworth brought her personal humanity to one role as a doctor, and one later as an old lady, Mrs. Timmins, with just the right attitude.

The evening is certainly not a feel-good romp. The play demands something back from the audience, and that is the deep awareness of how lucky we are, to not have had a stroke and not to have had to deal with all that Emily Stilson faced as she struggled to survive.

Thanks Ms. Trossbach for what you gave us. Sadly, the play ran only until November 26, but I urge you get on The Theater Laboratory of Florida's website, to find about the other courageous and cutting edge plays they'll be doing this season. I won't miss any of them. WWW.LABORATORY
THEATERFLORIDA.COM