

‘Be Here Now’ takes a heavy look at the subject of happiness

BY STEVE FEENEY

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The thought-provoking play is having its Maine premiere at the Public Theatre in Lewiston.

In its Maine premiere, the tenderhearted “Be Here Now” works from the far reaches of its offbeat assemblage of plot lines toward what is ultimately, as reviewed on opening night, an engaging and thought-provoking production.

Deborah Zoe Laufer’s play concerns an unhappy former college professor named Bari who has spent eight years trying to complete a thesis necessary for her to return to teaching. She is now working a manual job packaging imported figurines at a fulfillment center in upstate New York while trying to meaningfully reconcile with the meaninglessness she sees all around her.

Bari is quick to defend her pessimism while a pair of spunky co-workers try, by offering snippets of positive thinking rooted in their own coping mechanisms, to find out what’s really going on with her. They also try hard to fix her up with a date in the hope that a lover might bring her out of her funk.

Public Theatre veteran Janet Mitchko takes the lead role and adds just enough vulnerability to her Bari to give her pals (and the audience) some hope that she’s not a lost cause. But when Bari starts suffering seizures that, in their aftermath, provide her with an unexpectedly blissful feeling, things get complicated. Big questions about the nature and causes of true happiness, if there is such a thing, come to the fore and Mitchko, in her Bari’s face, shows the cost of asking them.

Sheila Stasack and Mary Mattison play co-workers Patty and Luanne who dabble in yoga and meditation while admitting that some of their emotional uplift comes courtesy of prescription medications.

Both performers are standouts in the very welcome lighter moments of the play. Stasack’s Patty contributes working-class wisdom along with touches of tough love as she counsels Bari. Mattison gives bubbly ingénue Luanne’s sweet overflow of concern more than enough energy to make her performance especially memorable. Things do slow down a bit in the second act when the two are mostly offstage.

Bari embarks on a blind date and subsequent choppy relationship with the town’s eccentric genius Mike, played by Russell Berrigan as a quirky artist with a striking edge born of a prior tragedy. Though he works with found objects, he’s reluctant to take on Bari, especially when her odd, seizure-related personality takes charge.

Longish conversations between the two about nihilism, redemption and whether happiness is a choice, not to mention Bari’s apparent need for medical attention, get quite heavy. But the two do form a bond after some rather tense moments, and a gentle denouement to this roughly 90-minute-plus-intermission show becomes possible.

The workplace and rough-hewn home sets by Amber Callahan, folksy costumes by Debra Susi, subject-to-quick-change lighting by Erin Fauble, and occasionally spaced-out sound by John Morrison all serve to give this Christopher Schario-directed production a good feel for the elusive here and now located within this unusual play.



Russell Berrigan as Mike and Janet Mitchko as Bari in a scene from “Be Here Now”