

## ‘THIS PLAY IS A PERFECT GEM’

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### ‘Brilliance sparkles’ in Lewiston Public Theatre’s ‘Morning After Grace’

Performances of the comedy-drama run through Sunday, Sept. 25.

Continuing its preeminent reputation, The Public Theater in Lewiston opened its 32nd season last weekend with a colloquial bang — “Morning After Grace” by Carey Crim — a wonderfully crafted comedy-drama offering an insightful visit with the baby-boom generation.



Kevin Jackson, Amy Tribbey and Kurt Zischke in *Morning After Grace*

The title itself is a sly play on words that qualifies as a rare and clever triple entendre, but that’s just the beginning. In its entirety, this play is a perfect gem. Its brilliance sparkles by way of the multi-faceted abilities of the actors, the taut script (both genuinely funny and wrenchingly poignant) and revelations presented through the characters.

A simple twist of fate launches Act 1. A slightly more than middle-aged couple awakens after a delicious one-night stand. We quickly learn of the darkly comedic encounter at a funeral that led to this improbable hook-up, and away we go on an adult, two-act tale that will resonate authentically with everyone, but particularly with those of that age group.

While the lives of the three characters involved are not “ordinary,” they certainly touch on many experiences common to us all: aging, love, loss, sex and grief. For those of us of that “certain age,” the play’s format bears an uncanny similarity to a sitcom from the 1950s: “The Honeymooners.” The characters are familiar but are now upscale and updated with a look and feel that speaks to contemporary adults of all ages. For example, while the “Honeymooners” set featured a dingy and sparsely decorated low-rent tenement flat in New York City, “Morning After Grace” set designer Amber Callahan offers a beautifully appointed condominium on the Florida coast complete with stainless appliances, sleek modern furniture and a sliding glass doorway hinting at a patio and pool beyond.

The three inhabitants here bear noticeable resemblance to the “Honeymooners” of yore. “Honeymooner” know-it-all bus driver Ralph Kramden, he of the volcanic temperament, is now superseded by Angus, a lawyer who is also volatile and “bossy,” so dubbed by Abigail, an attractive, smart, professional woman with three master’s degrees. She is the modern Alice, Ralph’s plain, practical, but feisty wife. Though Angus and Abigail are not married, the two spar with the same intensity as did the Kramdens. Meanwhile, the third character in “Morning After Grace,” former pro baseball player Ollie, is the reincarnation of “Honeymooners” sewer worker Ed Norton, the Kramdens’ witty, wisecracking, busybody neighbor.

Amy Tribbey is delightful as Abigail, who has awakened to find herself unsure of where she is and with whom. From here she hilariously discovers that, just when you think things can’t get worse, they inevitably do. Her

proper but creative “fake swearing,” as it is dubbed by Angus, is cute and endearing. And it bestows even more power and finality to her deservedly well-chosen expletive to Angus later on.

Angus, played by Kurt Zischke, is Abigail’s vigorous and spirited casual one-nighter. He awakens to an irate Abigail and the raucous fun begins as assumptions, explanations and excuses abound. A bit chauvinistic, Angus charmingly tries to allay Amy’s concerns without directly providing answers she seeks. In coming to grips with how she wound up in this situation, she wants to know “Are you married?” By now we have surmised the answer, but Abigail is still wondering whose dress she has hastily donned to cover herself.

As things become more confused and contentious, enter Ollie, played by Kevin Jackson. His presence further confounds the situation. Angus, with only a passing knowledge of who Ollie is, mistakenly assumes he plays a sordid part in things as he appears to have known Angus’ spouse rather well. Ollie’s ambiguous explanations generate solid laughs as Angus erupts in imagining the worst. And Abigail, who hid at Ollie’s arrival out of modesty, reappears to stir the pot. Ollie seems to know Abigail as well. Even more outrageous misunderstandings take flight as Ollie asks Angus how much she has charged him. Surprises abound as things proceed. Angus decides he needs to decompress and produces his deceased wife’s medical marijuana stash as Act 1 concludes.

Act 2 begins on a high note as Angus fires up a bong and gets relaxed, offering to share with Abigail and Ollie. With minimum coaxing, they join him and soon the conversation turns giddy. Great ideas and laughter are tossed about with abandon until all are distracted by the onset of the “munchies” and fulfillment of their cravings.

But the action then turns serious and a heated argument between Angus and Abigail about confronting grief ensues. Angus’ blistering accusation that therapists like Abigail choose that profession because they need therapy themselves sees Abigail leave in red-faced anger. Angus is left alone and weeping. He collapses on the couch in a fetal position. Clever lighting by Kristof Janezic portrays the passing of three days as Angus remains nearly catatonic.

Ollie comes by and finds Angus, and cajoles him into taking nourishment. Having earlier resolved his own issues through “testifying” with Abigail’s encouragement, Ollie becomes the recipient of Angus’ own effort to confront his feelings about his deceased wife’s death and infidelity. Both Jackson as Ollie and Zischke as Angus make the most of these touching, revealing soliloquys, providing dramatic counterpoint to the comedic overtones of the rest of the play.

The three accomplished actors who bring Abigail, Angus and Ollie to life are scintillating facets of this animated and entertaining play. What we learn of them and from them through a layered series of surprises and personal revelations will bring laughter to your soul, a tug at your heart and perhaps a tear to your eye. Together and individually, they are touchstones for the baby-boom generation’s rite of passage to retirement age. So skilled are they in their portrayals that their characters become as familiar to us as if they are friends, family members or even ourselves. The wonder of great acting is that it never appears to be performance. Instead, it is invitation to become unseen voyeurs into the lives of real people. While the action is laced with fast-paced repartee, the heart of it is the reluctance to acknowledge or accept the need for grieving. We see that each of the characters has issues that have long been muffled, albeit ineffectually, beneath the comforters of denial and avoidance.

Oscar Wilde said “With age comes wisdom,” adding, “But sometimes age comes alone.” “Morning After Grace” acknowledges this with both humor and pathos, while sterling performances captivate the audience. It allows painful truths to be presented and accepted, safely masked by the laughable circumstances of these terrifically real people.

Performances at the Public Theatre run through Sunday afternoon.