



Flying into a cuckoo's nest

review by Nan Lincoln

ELLSWORTH - The second offering from the New Surry Theater's summer repertory season, John Guare's "House of Blue Leaves" is a complete change of pace from the intense drama of their first production, Arthur Miller's "A View From the Bridge."

Cindy Robbins, Shari John and Tim Pugliese made an odd menage à trois in the New Surry Theatre production of "House of Blue Leaves," which continues playing Aug. 18-20 at the Ellsworth High School Performing Arts Center. PETER TRAVERS PHOTO

While both plays center on the inner workings of an American family, the Miller play comes at it straight on. We meet the family, discover some tensions underlying their seemingly cozy family unit, and then watch helplessly as that little tear in the fabric grows bigger and bigger and eventually the whole thing is in tatters. If it's rough going, at least it takes place on solid, familiar ground.

In "Blue Leaves," however, the audience is constantly kept off balance by the quirky family the playwright introduces us to, and the circumstances they find themselves in, or get themselves into.

Set in October 1965, the play at first seems to be a story about Artie (Tim Pugliese), an aspiring, yet talent-challenged songwriter, and his ditzy and ambitious girlfriend, Bunny (Shari John). When we first meet this couple in a New York apartment, Bunny is equally enthused about Artie's future career as a movie musical writer and the pope's planned visit to the city - regarding the latter as a good omen for the prospects of the former.

Then, another woman appears on the scene - comes out of the bedroom, in fact. Turns out it's Artie's nutty wife, aptly named Bananas (Cindy Robbins). While Bananas is clearly, well, bananas - she likes to play puppy dog, and freaks out when she feels her fingernails growing - she has these moments of total clarity that make her seem like the only sane one in a bunch of loonies that includes her and Artie's grown son, Ronnie (Julian Chapman), whose failed dreams of fame and fortune as a child star have been warped into desire for infamy as the guy who blew up the pope; three star-struck nuns (June Carter, Elizabeth Moran and Dindy Royster); a deaf movie starlet (Kelly Wilder); and Billy (Ralph Chapman), a producer of bad Hollywood musical movies.

As strange as this mix of characters is, the mix of zany, even slapstick comedy, with disturbing psychological drama and really, really disturbing violence is stranger still.

When this play was written in the 1980s, the notion of some nutcase deciding to blow up the pope because he missed out on a chance to play Huck Finn may have been a darkly humorous notion.

But in today's post-Oklahoma City, 9/11, Ted Kozinsky world of violent zealots and suicide bombers, it is not.

So I wondered why on earth NST director Bill Raiten had chosen this particular play. The answer to this question revealed itself again and again throughout the performance. As uncomfortable as the story is at times, the characters offer some real acting challenges to its cast, and Mr. Raiten's ensemble of actors is well suited to handle most of those challenges.

As Artie, Mr. Pugliese is terrifically pathetic as the deluded songwriter who doesn't even realize one of his best songs has the same tune as "White Christmas." He's also good at revealing his ambivalence toward his wife: As much as he wants to dump her in a loony bin and run off with Bunny, he also harbors a notion, as deluded as his musical dreams, that somehow the three of them can all live happily together. And as Bunny, Ms. John could very well put the word, "energizer," in front of her character's name; she brings so much hyper-enthusiasm and electricity to the part, it's hard not to like her, even though her wiring is dangerously faulty. Ms. Robbins makes us all root for Bananas. When the sudden patches of blue sky appear in her befuddled brain, we think, "Oh, hurrah, she's going to snap out of it," and then "Oh, no!" when the clouds inevitably gather again.

One of the highlights of the show is her monologue about a trip into the city that starts out plausibly enough, and then gets increasingly far-fetched to the point where she ends up with Jackie Kennedy, her young son John-John, President Lyndon Johnson, Bob Hope and Cardinal Spellman in the back seat of her car. While the account is hilarious, at the same time it's heartbreaking to see how off-kilter the woman really is.

Perhaps the biggest stretch in the production is made by young Mr. Chapman. In "A View From the Bridge," he played the sweet-tempered Italian suitor; in this play, as Ronnie, his scowls and glowers beneath beetled brows are so menacing you could have placed him on the roof of a Gothic cathedral to substitute for a gargoyle. And his resentful account of his traumatic childhood acting debut is both horribly sad and terribly funny.

The three goofy nuns who appear in the second act, along with the deaf starlet, provide some more comical moments - especially Ms. Moran as the young nun who decides life as a gay divorcee of Christ might be more fun than life in a nunnery - but their inclusion in the plot line is such an odd fit it's almost if they are characters from a different play who wandered onto this set by accident - a fatal accident, actually.

While Mr. Chapman as the successful Billy isn't particularly convincing as a grieving widower, nor as a lascivious "breast man" eyeing Bunny's endowment, I'm not sure Billy is supposed to be believable. It's a sketchy, clichéd part John Guare as written for him, and mostly he serves as another vehicle to drive home Artie's desperate self-absorption.

When this play debuted on Broadway it earned a bunch of Tony Awards and nominations for its actors, as well as its playwright. If the play doesn't stand up so well 20 years later, most of its characters do.

Gerry Newman's set - the retro kitchen and living room of Artie and Banana's apartment - is

great: It looks like you could cook dinner for company in that kitchen; and Elena Bourakovsky's costumes and furnishings, including a "modernistic" dinette set are, as ever, perfect - where on earth does she find this stuff?

"House of Blue Leaves" will continue its run at the Ellsworth High School Performing Arts Center this Thursday, Friday and Saturday, Aug. 18-20. Curtain is at 7:15 p.m. For ticket information and reservations, call 374-5556. n

