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actors impressive

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By: Randy Foster

Special to the Advertiser

The Alabama Shakespeare Festival's presentation of W.S. Maugham's "Sheppey" is highlighted by a magnificent performance from Phillip Pleasants, strong supporting players, and the apt direction of artistic director Kent Thompson.

"Sheppey", Maugham's play from 1933, seems particularly appropriate to our times.

After winning the Irish Sweepstakes, Sheppey is consumed with questions of religious import, concerned with helping others and confounded (as are we) by the varied responses of these closest to him.

It seems that his friends and family have their own agendas barely bubbling beneath the surface. Maugham addresses many issues that were current in his time- many questions are raised and few concrete solutions are indicated.

If this sounds like our social comment posing as drama, think again. This is a marvelous evening of theatre. It is funny, thought provoking and accessible.

Sheppey as embodied by Philip Pleasants is the focus of the play's revelations. We meet a contented barber in Act I. The Sheppey that we see in Acts II and III is a totally different creature. Pleasants shows us a man who is psychically and physically as a result of circumstance and luck.

This role joins the ranks of the most impressive in a long line of best roles for this actor. Rarely does an audience get to see such a perfect melding of actor and role.

The balance of the cast is impressive as well. Sonja Lanzenor captures the antithetical feelings of Sheppey's spouse. We follow the myriad emotions that are at war inside her. We share her concern for her husband and his health as well as her love and hopes for her daughter. Finally, it is heart wrenching to watch her accede to stronger outside forces.

Kim Ders creates a Bessie Legros who is savvy, brash, and direct. Her consternation at Sheppey's actions is told in simple ways, with small gestures, and in her ultimate inability to accept his kindness. She is equally impressive in a supernatural role that caused difficulties for some critics at the play's original premiere.

Chris Mixon brings a humorous fussiness to Bradley. His warmth and concern for Sheppey are understandable, and we believe his changes in the latter portions of the play. Florrie and Ernest, Sheppey's daughter and her fiance, are strong creations. Kaitlin O'Neal is the young girl trying to "better herself" in order to deserve her intended. Aaron Krohn is the nerdy, ambitious, effusive schoolmaster, who is her fiance. His characterization borders on the cartoonish, but it never falls off that slippery slope. His dreams for the couple seem so exact that they just may happen.

Paul Hebron, in dual roles, creates a dandified Mr. Bolton and a Dr. Jervis whose concern is for his friend Sheppey, but is enamored of the dictates of Freudian psychiatry. His attempts to do the right thing are understandable, if misguided.

Rodney Clark is delightful, and repugnant, as Cooper, who is ultimately changed by the kindness shown to him by Sheppey.

The barbershop denizens serve mainly expository functions, but are crisp characterizations. They help usher us into a solid, predictable world that will soon change forever.

Kent Thompson has directed with a sure hand, clear vision, and a sense of humor. His stage pictures are eye-catching and never obscure the focal point. He has moved this nearly three-hour production along nicely.

The sets- a delightfully detailed barbershop in Act I and the Miller's house in Acts II and II- are lovely to the eye and supportive of the characters' lives. The home in particular has a lived-in feeling. The sofa coverings in deep shades of rust or brown, Sheppey's chair prominently placed in front of the fire, and the beauty of the English place setting on the table attest to attention on detail from designer Emily Beck.

Go see "Sheppey" for its wonderful performances. You'll think about the questions it raises long after you've left the theater.

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