

It's no theater secret: 'Rimers' is excellent

by Mark Lord, qboro contributor | Posted: Thursday, June 23, 2016 10:30 am

It is always a pleasure to see the emergence of a new theater group, and so it is with Larry Singer Studios ONStage, now presenting its inaugural production, Lanford Wilson's small-town drama "The Rimers of Eldritch," at The Secret Theatre in Long Island City.

Set in the Midwestern Bible Belt town of Eldritch, Mo. in 1966, the play is, more than anything, a character study, and with an impressive cast of 18 playing an equal number of roles, there are interesting characters aplenty.

The play is also part murder mystery, and, as bits of evidence emerge, the audience becomes acquainted with the residents of the once prosperous coal mining community that has decayed — morally and physically — into a veritable ghost town.

The claustrophobic feeling of the place is established from the outset, with a series of wooden platforms (scenic design by Alex Michaels) serving as various locales, including a church, a courtroom and a forest, each clearly delineated and visible throughout, as are most of the members of the ensemble.

The murder of an old man, one of several outcasts in the community, is the springboard for much of what follows. The play bounces around in time, as well as in place, with snatches of dialogue heard repeatedly throughout and scenes occasionally intersecting.

This structure can result in some confusion among the spectators and does require their undivided attention. Thanks to the clean, steady direction by Singer, and a skilled cast that brings the characters to memorable life, this is never a problem, and the play's hour-and-a-half running time flies.

All the performers help to capture the feel of the story's time and place, bringing out the hypocrisy, the narrow-mindedness, the sexual frustrations, the yearning to escape in the town's denizens.

A central figure is Skelly Manor, a decrepit, mumbling derelict played with great passion by John Rengstorff, earning much sympathy for the character, who frequently serves as the town's scapegoat while being one of the few on hand to see things as they are. Equally memorable is Emily Jon Mitchell as another elderly resident, Mary, who suffers from dementia but can see clearly enough to foreshadow tragic events to come.

Benji Sills, his body constantly in motion, is completely natural as Robert Conklin, a rather naive young man who falls victim to the town's dogmatism. Cora, the middle-aged owner of the town's struggling cafe, is a touching figure as embodied by Judylee Vivier. When she falls for the tall, handsome stranger (a sturdy Jon Reinhold), it seems likely their relationship will end unhappily.



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The cast does a fine job in "The Rimers of Eldritch."

Sabra Shelly and Maureen O'Boyle capture the essence of the town's gossips, who serve as a sort of Greek chorus. Meredith Testa makes a convincing 14-year-old cripple, Eva, who has a particularly memorable scene in which she sexually provokes Robert.

The play, in fact, deals quite a bit with matters sexual, though much of it is only talked about, depicted in very dim lighting, or, at the play's end, merely heard from off-stage.

Kate McMorran has several fine moments as Patsy, a teenager who yearns for excitement. Stephanye Dussud is frustration personified as Mary's daughter, Nelly.

In the dual role of the town's preacher and judge, Tom Duane uses his booming voice to lay down the law, though he appears less assured than his fellow actors, and, oddly, reads many of his lines from his "Bible."

From the opening entrance of the company, the production is staged beautifully. The apropos costumes are the work of Kathryn Squitieri. Some fine choral singing adds to the atmosphere, though, last Saturday night, some technical issues found actors at times speaking on stage in darkness. And the use of some props while others are mimed seemed a rather haphazard artistic choice.

'The Rimers of Eldritch'

When: Thru June 26, various times

Where: The Secret Theatre, 44-02 23 St., Long Island City

Tickets: \$18. (347) 762-7731, snappedproductions.com