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## 'Magnetic North' is a mesmerizing exploration of intimacy

By: Kaitlyn Foti - Theater Reviewer  
 11/04/2008

Intimacy is a tricky subject for a playwright to tackle. How does one, for example, develop an atmosphere of intimacy between characters in 75 minutes, when in reality it takes a lifetime to develop between real people? William Donnelly, writer of "Magnetic North," now playing at Ambler's Act II Playhouse, does a fine job of delving right into the fragile marriage of James and Leigh, after a miscarriage threatens the foundations of their union.

Although sweet and even downright hilarious at times, the play is a serious take on the conventional ideas of infidelity, emotional and physical, and how far you have to go before you can't come back. James and Leigh each encounter their own challenge. James, played honestly and touchingly by Brad Heikes, strikes up a friendship with Mara, a former love, who is a passionate, if sometimes overly eccentric seductress played by Christie Parker. Although being fully honest to his wife about the communications and events regarding his reunion with Mara, his intentions are gray and suspicious, especially to his coworker and friend Emmett. Emmett, who at first seems like a pointless and clichéd character, turns out to be the life and breath of the play. Played by Paul Felder, Emmett has flawless comic timing and surprising emotional depth. He becomes a confidant to both James and Leigh, and he offers both advice and the needed humor that endears the audience more and more to a character who seems both lecherous and shallow in his first appearance in the third scene.

By the end of the play, Emmett is consoling Leigh as she waits for her husband to return home from an only partly coincidental run-in with Mara. Leigh, played patiently by Sarah Shahinian, starts out as a flat character, wearing a tattered green robe and barely moving from the couch. But as the problems in her marriage progressively rise to the surface, so does the true essence of the character, overcome with grief after losing her baby and terrified of also losing her husband, by whom she feels abandoned. Turning to Emmett at the height of her desperation, she encounters her own experience with the thin red line between flirtation and infidelity.

Although there are very few moments in the play when something actually happens - mostly the play is designed around conversations about trust, love, grief and loyalty - "Magnetic North" is aptly named for the way it draws audiences into the moral ambiguities of the four characters. The audience is dared to either condemn or validate the actions of James, Leigh, Mara or Emmett. These four characters are sympathetic yet frustrating, endearing yet annoying, right and wrong, all at the same time. In other words, they are real.

The direction of Bud Martin and use of the set are creative in aiding the staggered plot among three locations - the pub, James' work and the couple's home, with the play's climax taking place at two places at once, with two separate, but eerily similar conversations going on between James and Mara at the pub and Leigh and Emmett at her home. The back-and-forth colliding dialogue of the two splits any loyalty the audience might have been feeling towards any one character. Loyalty, after all, is easily lost under such circumstances.

continues  
 at Act II Playhouse,  
 56 E. Butler Ave.,  
 Ambler, PA 19002,  
 through Nov. 16.  
 Tickets: \$25 - \$30.  
 Info: 215-654-0200  
 or www.act2.org.

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