

A Pleasing, If Uneven, Walk Through the Forest

River Cities' Reader - July 13, 2005 - by Mike Schultz

There are two styles of drama going on in Lillian Hellman's *Another Part of the Forest*, or at least there are in the Richmond Hill Players' current production of it: domestic and melo-. A prequel of sorts to the author's more widely known *The Little Foxes*, *Another Part of the Forest* features, as its central figure, patriarch Marcus Hubbard (Stan Weimer), the richest man in Bowden, Alabama, circa 1880. A cruel, conniving, even murderous despot, Marcus is universally reviled, especially by his children – Benjamin (James V. Driscoll), Oscar (Steve Mroz), and Regina (Keri Cousins) – all of whom, for reasons of their own, want their hands on the family fortune.

It takes a while for this to be established, partly because Hellman's exposition is so protracted, and partly because the actors don't seem fully committed to their characters' darker sides. They seem, at worst, mildly devious, and the performers' apparent uncertainty about just how self-serving their characters should be makes the nature of their relationships and much of the dialogue confusing; I'd say it takes a full half-hour before the show finds its footing. (The rustling of programs is always a pretty fair indication that a show hasn't captured an audience's attention, and on Friday night at least, there was a lot of early rustling.)

Once the elements are in place for Marcus' eventual downfall, starting at a dinner party where the Hubbards and their neighbors begin hitting the old man up for money, *Another Part of the Forest* becomes bitchy, Southern-melodrama fun, and several actors begin to display a devilish confidence; Weimer and Driscoll are particularly fine, and Cousins knows how to let loose a mean left eyebrow. And in the minor role of Oscar's "fallen" girlfriend, Laurette, Candice Gregg is stunningly self-assured and polished; I, for one, kept waiting for her Act III return. (It never comes, damn it.) When the performers are going at their roles with gusto, *Another Part of the Forest* is terrifically enjoyable, and director Joe DePauw makes clever stage pictures based on the family dynamics.

But there's one crucial element of the production – Jackie Skiles' performance as Lavinia Hubbard – that I haven't yet discussed, for the simple reason that it sends *Another Part of the Forest* onto another plane entirely. When Skiles' clan matriarch is on stage, suddenly the family cat-fighting carries real weight, and even tragedy. Skiles plays this sad, shaking woman so astonishingly well that you can't take your eyes off her; I can't wait to see her performance as Mary Tyrone one day. With this character crumbling while the others play parlor games, the melodramatic and legitimately dramatic elements don't quite gel in this production of *Another Part of the Forest*, but it didn't bother me much; I was glad not to have missed any of them.

Richmond Hill stages worthwhile trip through "Forest"

Argus/Dispatch - July 13, 2005 - by Julie Jensen

The Richmond Hill Players' production of "Another Part of the Forest" is a compelling drama about a dysfunctional family in the post-Civil War South.

Joe DePauw, the director, has achieved audience empathy with a period piece, and wisely has his actors tap the Southern accent lightly but distinctly.

Stan Weimar is Marcus Hubbard, who ran the blockade and profited during the Civil War, barely escaping lynching by the people of his town.

Mr. Weimar's manner is "iron fist in a velvet glove," a subtle way to portray villainy.

James Driscoll brings a lot of passion to the role of Benjamin Hubbard, the oldest son, and Steve Mroz is Oscar Hubbard, the feckless younger brother.

Jackie Skiles plays Lavinia Hubbard, the deranged wife and mother of the family, with great feeling.

Keri Cousins is Regina Hubbard, the apple of her father's eye. Her lightning-quick changes of expression are remarkable.

Dana Skiles is Birdie Bagtry, who is seeking a loan from the usurers, and John Simosky plays John Bagtry, her brother, whom Regina hopes to marry.

Candice Gregg brings a lot of pizzazz to the role of Laurette Sincee, the Lady of the Evening loved by Oscar Hubbard, and Janine Cross is Coralee, the maid who makes Lavinia's life bearable.

Mike Skiles, Mark Schafer, Chad Koker and Eric Noyd perform their supporting roles well.

Money powers the Hubbard family, and as long as Marcus is in charge of it, he's the despotic boss. As it turns out, robbery at gun point becomes a family affair.

The last scene is a powerful fade-out that says a lot about the family feeling in all of Lillian Hellman's plays.