

"On Golden Pond," Richmond Hill Players

Quad City Times – July 16, 2003 - by Ruby Nancy

Screen legend and acting powerhouse Katharine Hepburn immortalized the role of Ethel Thayer in the film version of "On Golden Pond," and Ernest Thompson's play is probably well known in part because of Hepburn's work in the screen adaptation.

Her recent passing has no doubt added some poignance to the current production of the drama playing at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre in Geneseo, Ill. — which is dedicated to her — but there are other reasons for nostalgia associated with this version of the show.

Director Sharon Luikart made her directing debut in 1982 at Richmond Hill with "On Golden Pond," and she has again cast Muff LoGiudice as Ethel, so two decades later the two get a chance to work together on the same project. And those extra layers of emotion have enriched this production, which is both moving and funny.

LoGiudice does fine work as Ethel, infusing the role with a warmth and grace that is beautiful to watch. Her Ethel is physically frail and sometimes off in her own world mentally, but there is an emotional strength in the portrayal that centers everything else in the show.

Opposite her is David Rash, whose work as crusty Norman Thayer Jr., provides quite a bit of the comic relief in "On Golden Pond." His antics are lots of fun, but this role also has plenty of depth, and Rash gives it just the right touch. His on-stage connections with LoGiudice, Melissa May (who plays their daughter, Chelsea) and Ben Simpkins (as Billy Ray Jr., a surprise summer visitor) are very real, despite Norman's irascible persona.

Most of the supporting players also contribute to the overall quality of the show, especially May, who doesn't usually get to play roles with this level of complexity, and Kevin DeDecker, whose work as West Coast dentist Bill Ray Sr., is really wonderful. Bill's face-off with Rash's character — which includes an intergenerational man-to-man conversation about sex that is absolutely hilarious — is a wonderful example of the comedic potential of the material, which both are able to work for every single laugh.

As funny as "On Golden Pond" is, the show remains a drama at its core, and this version of it is good enough you might want to take a hanky. It's so completely character-driven that you might not notice the set or costumes at all, and in this case that's a first-class compliment to the performers.

Whether your nostalgia is for Hepburn, for the 1982 Richmond Hill production, or just for a time when teenagers and older folks actually had a chance to become friends, this show is an enjoyable way to spend a couple of hours this weekend.

Richmond Hill does stand-up job with 'On Golden Pond'

Argus/Dispatch – July 16, 2003 - by Julie Jensen

Standing ovations at the Richmond Hill Barn are as rare as snowflakes in July, but Muff LoGiudice and David Rash inspired one with their performances in "On Golden Pond" last weekend.

The play was dedicated to Katherine Hepburn, who died recently at the age of 96. She played Ethel Thayer, Ms. LoGiudice's role, to Henry Fonda's Norman Thayer, played by David Rash.

One can't help wondering if Ms. Hepburn lived our Ethel's observation, "I've seen death, and touched death and feared it, but today was the first time I've felt it. It feels - odd. Cold, I guess. But not that bad really. Almost comforting, not so frightening, not such a bad place to go."

Ms. LoGuidice was reprising the role she played in the early 1980s at the Barn. She's the perfect mate for Norman Thayer, the crotchety, eccentric man with a morbidly humorous fixation about death played by Dr. David Rash.

Dr. Rash gets his laughs with funny lines and body language, and in his truly serious moments, he commands empathy.

The Thayers are spending their 48th summer on Golden Pond in Maine, and their daughter, Chelsea, comes for a visit with her lover, Bill Ray, and his 13-year-old son, Billy Ray Junior.

Melissa May is Chelsea, a former fat girl, who has problems relating to her father. She is particularly moving in the scene in which she pleads with him for an improved relationship.

Kevin DeDecker is the dentist Chelsea is in love with. He's terrified of bears but brave enough to get down to brass tacks with her father about his relationship with Chelsea.

Ben Simkins plays Billy Ray Jr. who becomes Norman's surrogate son. He's gutsy enough to stare Norman down. They talk about "sucking Face" (kissing) and go fishing together.

Rounding out the cast is Stan Weimer, who plays Charlie the mailman, Chelsea's boyfriend on Golden Pond for many summers. He cackles and carries on in a down east accent.

This is Sharon Luikart's second time around directing "On Golden Pond". It was, in fact, the first show she directed at Richmond Hill. She paces it well and brings out some intense emotions, along with lots of laughs.

Norman's 80th birthday is being celebrated, and when Billy Jr. asks his age, He says, "Eighty. If you think that's old, you ought to meet my father." Billy asks incredulously, "Is he still alive?" "No", Norman says, "but you should meet him".

In his tête-à-tête with the dentist, who asks, "How does it feel to turn 80," Norman says, "Twice as bad as it did to turn 40". During their conversation, Norman is rudely reading a book, emerging from its pages only to ask, "What do you charge for a filling?" The answer, \$140.00, stuns him. He says, "My brother charged \$5.00 until her raised it to \$7.00. That's when I quit going to him".

Bill says, "Chelsea told me you like to play with people's heads", and he certainly does. The house on Golden Pond sets Chelsea off, reviving painful memories. Norman may be her father, but he has never been her daddy.

As they are preparing to leave their lakeside home at the end of the summer, Norman picks up a large crate of china and is stricken. Ethel rushes to find the nitroglycerin, and he says, "You must be mad! I might blow up". She prays, "Dear God don't take him. You don't want him he's an old poop!". The old poop rallies, and that's when she delivers the lines about death quoted earlier. Her prayer is answered, and she says, "Life will go on, won't it?". "I hope so", he says, and they go out to say goodbye to the lake and listen to the loons calling.