

## **“Tavern” is funny, moving, without schlock**

**Quad City Times - by Ruby Nancy**

After seeing several shows that focus on youthful angst, it was especially refreshing to attend a performance of the delightful "Over the Tavern," which runs through this weekend at the Richmond Hill Barn Theatre.

Funny, moving, family-oriented — without even an ounce of schlock — this show features young Lucas Waller as Rudy Pazinski, a 12-year-old skeptic best known for his catechism class run-ins with the tyrannical Sister Clarissa (Peggy Freeman) and his impersonations of Ed Sullivan. Waller's very good work and the wonderful turn by Freeman are just two of the many great performances that make this production one of my favorites of the summer.

Set in 1959, "Tavern" takes its name from where the Pazinski's live, an apartment over the bar Rudy's parents own. Rudy has a couple of pouty teen siblings and a sweet brother who is mentally challenged, so the youngster finds his place as the family comedian. In addition to his Sullivan bit, Rudy also has jokes, including some about Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem — and Waller delivers them all with a deliberate self-consciousness that works perfectly for the role and for the material. His lines include prayers (both grudging and heartfelt), too, which this young actor also takes in stride.

Freeman's Sister Clarissa is tough and ancient, wielding the authority of the Catholic Church with a heavy, experienced hand. Faced with unprecedented challenges from a student who says he'd like to "shop around" before his confirmation, Sister's exasperation (as played by Freeman) is a palpable thing, and her work throughout the arc of this diehard character is superb.

Angela Rathman is also great as Ellen, Rudy's mom, and the infusion of warmth — and bit of spunk — she gives her character is absolutely perfect. Likewise, Jeremy Mahr's work as the dad is a fine example of character work; it is easy to see that Chet is hard-nosed and unhappy, but his love for the children is also evident.

As the other three Pazinskis, RJ Pratt (as Georgie), Kevin Maynard (as Eddie) and Miranda Lipes (as Annie) also turn in first-rate performances. Pratt's sweet simplicity and warmth are deftly done, and Maynard's Eddie is the perfect realization of a teen who is ready for something to change. Lipes' character also faces change, and, with the help of a supportive mother, does just fine.

My small beef is with an otherwise-wonderful set which necessitates the repeated setting and removing of a prayer bench and school desk, but director Susan Simosky has assembled a terrific cast and helped them create what is a truly excellent show.

Well-written, heartwarming scripts like these don't come along often — and even when they do, the end result often does not do them justice — but this "Over the Tavern" is a rare and precious thing that is simply too good to miss.

## **A Dysfunctional Family You'd Want to Join**

**River Cities' Reader - August 17, 2005 - by Mike Schultz**

At Friday's nearly sold-out performance of *Over the Tavern* at Richmond Hill's Barn Theatre, I found myself seated next to a charming couple who engaged me in conversation. I asked whether they had heard of the play previously, as Tom Dudzick's comedy was unfamiliar to me. The gentleman responded that he'd read a little bit about it, but his wife said, "Not me. I like being surprised."

What a fantastic surprise *Over the Tavern* is!

Set in 1959, the play concerns the Pakinskis, a lower-middle-class Polish-Catholic clan living above a bar in Buffalo, New York. Our hero, 12-year-old Rudy Pazinski (Lucas Walter), is dealing

not only with a severe crisis of faith, but with his continually squabbling family: Ellen (Angela Rathman), Rudy's exhausted, good-humored mother; Chet (Jeremy Mahr), his father, perpetually in a bad mood; older brothers Eddie (Kevin Maynard), in the middle stages of pure horn-doggedness, and Georgie (RJ Pratt), a mentally challenged sweetheart; and teen sister Annie (Miranda Lipes), whose interest in boys and snack cakes has, sadly for her, exploded.

In truth, *Over the Tavern* isn't very original; substitute "Jewish" for "Polish-Catholic" and it's practically Brighton Beach Memoirs. (Like young Eugene in Neil Simon's play, Tavern's lead is a fledgling comic – Rudy has a penchant for Ed Sullivan imitations – and his family members are nearly doppelgängers of Brighton Beach's Jerome clan.) And I wasn't much surprised, after a Google search, to learn that Dudzick's 1994 play is "semi-autobiographical" – Rudy is such a clever, preternaturally wise tyke that he just had to be the playwright's alter-ego, and Tavern occasionally stumbles in its sentimentality; there are a few too many therapy-session outbursts.

But, good Lord, is this play ever funny – far funnier, I think, than Brighton Beach. Dudzick has created marvelously-etched characters and had the good sense to make them all natural comedians; there isn't a single one you don't adore (including the play's seventh figure, an imposing nun played by Peggy Freeman). The family scenes have a beguiling realism that gives the cast's laugh lines added depth, and the production's talented director, Susan Simosky, guides her actors expertly; you'd be happy to spend several more hours in their presence.

The show is anchored by two absolutely splendid performances by Rathman and Mahr, who create a heartbreakingly, hilariously believable married couple. Rathman, with her smoky, expressive voice and weary physicality, is perfectly matched by Mahr, whose exterior gruffness disguises the teddy bear beneath; Mahr's performance suggests De Niro crossed with John Goodman. A scene of the couple dancing together, quietly in the kitchen, is the play's finest, subtlest moment.

Walter is an incredibly promising actor – focused and polished – and though he needs to slow down his readings, he's an effortlessly charming young comic. (Walter delivers a joke about Joseph and Mary that, in itself, is nearly worth the price of admission.) Maynard and Freeman are delightfully deadpan, Lipes is an ebullient, inventive comedienne, and Pratt, with his beaming, honest grin, is spectacularly funny and achingly adorable in this, his stage debut; I'm dying to see more from him.

*Over the Tavern* might be a stage sitcom, but it's a positively first-rate sitcom, warm and richly felt and downright hilarious. There are flaws in the material, yes, but I could hardly care less about them; I loved this production.

And good news for those who might feel as strongly about the play as I did: During that Internet search, I discovered that *Over the Tavern* is the first installment of a Pazinski-family trilogy that continues with *King o' the Hill*, set in the '60s, and *Lake Effect*, which concludes the family saga in the '70s. If I were on Richmond Hill's play-selection committee, I'd secure rights to those other two immediately; as *Over the Tavern* suggests, its sequels could be equally enjoyable – and equally deserving – hits.

## **“Over the tavern” serious, yet funny**

**Argus/Dispatch - August 17, 2005 - by Julie Jensen**

'Over The Tavern' will be presented by the Richmond Hill Players today through Sunday and again Aug. 18-21 at the Barn Theater in Richmond Hill Park, Geneseo. Angela Rathman and Lucas Waller, both of Geneseo, rehearse a scene from the comedy.

In "Over the Tavern," the Richmond Hill Players' current offering, a Polish-American Catholic family includes a 12-year-old Martin Luther, which generates both amusement and angst.

The play is well-cast, and director Susan Simosky keeps the rapidly shifting scenes moving nicely.

The set, designed by Angela Rathman and Jill Whitesell, is primarily the family's apartment with one small corner becoming St. Casmir's Elementary School, its chapel and a hospital as needed.

Peggy Freeman is a fierce Sister Clarissa, wielding a punishing ruler and bullying Rudy Pazinski, the 12-year-old played effectively by Lucas Waller.

R.J. Pratt is Rudy's mentally impaired, thumb-sucking brother, Georgie; Kevin Maynard is their older brother, Eddie; and Miranda Lipes is their sister, Annie.

All of them have issues with Catholicism, but only Rudy thinks past its strictures.

The parents are Chet, played by Jeremy Mahr, and Ellen, played by Angela Rathman. Chet is supposed to pick up their spaghetti dinner and forgets, and there's nothing to eat in the apartment but canned beets. This is just one of the ways he fails his family.

Ellen is a loving mother who breaks the nun's punishing ruler and tries to support all of her kids.

The couple recalls the beginning of their relationship by dancing the polka to radio music, and for a few minutes, they are almost happy.

Annie feels guilty about devouring Twinkies daily, George has learned a naughty word and uses it constantly, and Eddie is concerned about whether his impure thoughts are venal sins or worse.

Rudy prays in the school chapel, returning to the kneeler for numerous postscripts, and he has trouble learning the catechism. He doesn't believe in hell, he does believe man was created by God to have fun, and he wants to shop around in the world's 1,300 religions. Impersonating Ed Sullivan, he announces that his guest star is Jesus Christ.

When Chet decides that his family will say grace, Rudy chimes in with "Now I lay me down to sleep."

The play is set in 1959, but some of its issues are still current, and while they are serious, they generate a lot of laughs.