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Performers shine in 40th-anniversary production

Four decades later, George Ryga's landmark play feels somewhat dated, but remains a commendable work

Peter Birnie, Vancouver Sun

Published: Friday, November 30, 2007

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The last thing a first nations play should do is preach. After all, didn't aboriginal Canadians suffer enough of such pious prattling in residential schools?

While we were all following Pied Piper of niceness Bobby Gimby in our centennial year, The Ecstasy of Rita Joe was going a long way toward lighting a fire under complacent Canadians. George Ryga's landmark play played heavily on white guilt, alerting us to the shameful state of "Indian" affairs in our cities, but Rita Joe has never escaped its artifice.

A new production on the play's 40th anniversary highlights its many positive points, but cannot avoid the clutches of a dated approach to theatre. The Ecstasy of Rita Joe is a commendable work best viewed as the progenitor of better plays.

Ryga was born to a Ukrainian-Canadian family, but a childhood spent in abject poverty and close proximity to a Cree community in Alberta led him to a lifelong fight for first nations rights. The Ecstasy of Rita Joe pulls no punches in its condemnation of the bland face of white justice and its inability to understand native ways.

Lisa Ravensbergen gives a powerful performance as the title character, bravely conveying the deep flaws in this noble young woman. Rita was too smart in school and is now too proud in the city, and when a naive country girl finds she is no match for the many ways white society will trip her up, Ravensbergen brings Rita to a roiling boil of frustration.

Above Rita looms the magistrate, equally frustrated by the revolving-door nature of his too-frequent courtroom meetings with the poor woman. William B. Davis finds the heart of this kind man, and just as precisely turns him on a dime for a second-act rant filled with bitterness about "Indian" intransigence.

Kevin Loring is also excellent as Rita's boyfriend Jaimie Paul, honestly written and beautifully portrayed as a good guy who unfortunately likes to party hearty. The play's greatest poignancy comes in the scenes between these doomed lovers, and Ravensbergen and Loring give great weight to the play's most powerful moments.

The rest of the cast is also strong, from Alvin Sanders as the sweet-natured but ultimately pompous director of a native-outreach shelter to Duncan Fraser as a rather oblivious priest. Dressed in full flower-power regalia, Tracey Power strums a guitar throughout the show; her own music and that of Ann Mortifee from the original production is unfortunately a little too twee in its dated '60s hand-wringing.

Donna Spencer directs with the steady hand needed to give The Ecstasy of Rita Joe its proper place as an icon of theatre. Craig Alfredson's set is a handsome swirl of circles and ramps backed by a semicircular screen, its first nations symbolism amply aided by James Proudfoot's powerful palette of lights cast in peaceful hues of blue -- and blood red.

Sun Theatre Critic

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