

HOUSE OF BLUE LEAVES Review

By Catherine McKinney

The Ellsworth American.

As the second of two repertory performances, the New Surry Theatre presents John Guare's 'The House of Blue Leaves.' In a nutshell, hop into the car, open the wallet, and spend a few hours with this talented ensemble. You will be glad you did. Not one actor, prop nor flash of light is extraneous to this dark comedy. The costumes are well suited to each character capping their visual delineation. The set is hard-worked and stands up well to the rigors of the actor's physical abuse. Even the stagehands' preparations seduce the audience.

From the very moment you take your seat the magic of the evening unfolds with a series of voyeuristic and, at times, soulful explorations. This exploration of the serious dysfunction created by the seduction of fame could leave the audience in an ill humor, but the humorous revelations of the play rivet one's attention and weaves a spell unbroken from start to finish.

The true magic, as woven by these talented actors, is the continuing breach of the veil that exists between the actors and the audience. Several characters stop their interaction with each other to speak directly to the audience, thus sharing their thoughts, a familiar dramatic device. However, it is the physical breach of this veil that truly enhances the audience's experience.

The audience finds itself smack dab in the middle of Artie and Bananas Shaughnessy's Queens, New York apartment on Oct. 4, 1965. The Pope is coming to town and all are a flutter. Artie, well played by Tim Pugliese, is asleep on the couch, and may have wished he could have stayed so. Artie, our hero, works at the zoo, cares for his mentally ill wife and writes songs no one sings. He is dreaming of his success as a songwriter, hoping his boyhood friend, the now famous Hollywood producer, Billy Einhorn (Ralph Chapman), will give him the helping hand he so desperately seeks.

Artie's mistress Bunny Flingus, wonderfully created by Shari John, is standing at the ready to help herself to her bit of fame by pushing Artie to pursue his tenuous connection to Hollywood. A dream within a dream, within a dream. John brings New York to life with her voice and Bunny's dedication to fame, with the rest of her talents. However pursuing a dream is not that easy for our hero. His son, Ronnie, is AWOL from the army and has returned to New York to blow up the Pope, thus helping himself to his fifteen minutes. Julian Chapman brings an almost over-the-top performance to the stage but his physically large, and energetic, conversation with the audience underscores the intensity of his character.

As for Ronnie's mom and Artie's wife, Bananas, she appears to be the figure of tragedy but often exists as its antithesis, seamlessly moving in and out of the dream world at will. Cindy Robbins is superb with her portrayal of Bananas. Her comedic timing is spot on and the physical demands placed upon her by the role are flawlessly executed. The

character of Bananas reveals the seriousness of self-deception and the ineffectiveness of fame but cloaks the exploration with slapstick farce. And Robbins moves back and forth between being on stage and being with the audience with more ease than her character moves between perceived insanity and comprehended reality

As the day progresses the characters on stage are joined by the Pope, President Johnson, Joseph Kennedy, Jackie Kennedy and even young John John. Fraud would love how crowded that apartment becomes. Fame is a deceptive friend.

In dramatic reality Billy Einhorn's girlfriend Corinna Stroller (Kelly Wilder) stops by for a quick hello. All are smitten with her famous façade of perfection. Three nuns, trying to get to their favorite celebrity, the Pope, force themselves into the happy home and rev up the farcical momentum of the piece.

The enthralling fame does come through in the end, well almost. Ralph Chapman brings to life an expected caricature of a Hollywood producer (Billy Einhorn) without becoming a cartoon and his character delivers what could be the saving grace for all concern.

As the play progresses and the overwhelming influences of fame and the deep self-delusions are revealed, the magical spell woven by this cast is never broken. The intermission came as an intrusion to what was being created on stage. And the laughter was continuous.

It is not until after the play and reflection allows, that the real depth of this piece reveals itself. The subtlety of change which overcomes Artie as the day progresses and the truths he learns about those around him and himself bring on an ending, albeit unexpected. With the Viet Nam war flowing like a river in the background, 'The House of Blue Leaves' comically illuminates some of the dark places of the soul.

Director Bill Raiten has brought out the best of actor, designer and crew. I will leave the performance's flaws for him to detect. The spell cast over the audience is all encompassing and should definitely be experienced.

Please note that a strobe light is used during the