

THE TROY RECORD

Robert Goepfert

GLENS FALLS - I am seldom satisfied at a Caryl Churchill play. To me, she's an infuriating playwright because she never lets you become emotionally involved with her characters.

On the other hand, there are few people working in theater who offer more thought-provoking work. Her plays always address topical subjects and her fresh approach has you thinking about the issues in new ways.

For example, "A Number", her newest play, which is at Adirondack Theatre Festival through Saturday, is a play about cloning. That's on the surface. Actually the play is about another topical issue - identity theft, in its truest form. Too, in some ways, "A Number" is also about the relationship between fathers and sons.

In "A Number" a father meets three identical sons, one at a time. They seem strangers to him and the first son questions why he had the cloning done and explains what it is like not to have his own distinctive identities. Another son appears. He's sullen, bitter and disturbed. His resentment is more accusatory than it is pleading.

A third Bernard closes the piece. He's a seemingly normal individual with all the typical problems that come from having a wife, three small children and a stressful job. He seems unconcerned that there are perhaps twenty more like him out there and points out that most humans have more than 98% of the same DNA and even a head of lettuce shares about 30% of human DNA. What's the problem?

In the first scene Bernard laments, "I'm a copy." The father answers "You're perfect." Indeed, as the stories unfold, it is implied Bernard Two is actually the natural son and because of some undefined defect the father had him cloned so that he could have the perfect child - the first Bernard we meet. The third son is sort of a pirated version, made by a scientist who illegally got hold of the DNA and made illegal clones.

I happen to think that her big joke is that the "normal" son represents most of society who prefer boring, insipid lives and are natural clones of each other.

However, because the work is presented as a mystery in which information is dolled out a dollop at a time, it is difficult to become involved in the situation. Churchill's writing style unites the obscurity of Samuel Beckett and the tediousness of Harold Pinter. Sentences are never completed, silence prevails and no character has emotional integrity. Even at only 80-minutes, without an intermission, it seems long.

However, the production values are magnificent. David Barlow is wonderful as he creates three distinctive Bernards, and he finds enough similarity in them to make you wonder if they are not actually the same person. Robert La Velle is perfect as the taciturn Salter. He is able to suggest an inability to feel in numerous subtle ways that all add up to guilt without remorse.

Sturgis Warner's direction makes Churchill's writing seem more dramatic than it is as he creates tension through powerful stage images. He is helped by Ben Stanton's amazing lighting and James Wolk's fluid set design along with Daron West's powerful sound design.

"A Number" is one of Adirondack Theater Festival's finer productions - but sadly the obtuse material should have limited appeal to a general audience.

"A Number," Adirondack Theatre Festival, Charles Wood Theatre, Glen Street, Glens Falls.

Performances 8 p.m. Wednesday- Saturday. Tickets \$27. 798-WOOD.