

Mark Crawford's Birds and the Bees is riotously funny



By Constance Scrafield

The Opening Night audience at *The Birds and the Bees* laughed uproariously throughout the performance and were ecstatically entertained by the end.

They jumped to their feet for a standing ovation, with such approbation that would thrill any playwright, in this case, Mark Crawford. It certainly thrilled the cast and director Jane Spence.

They earned every clap of it, for this is a play to remember and one that will tour far and wide. It is already being produced with Drayton Entertainment in Cambridge, with another cast and team. This Theatre Orangeville production is going immediately it closes here to Theatre Collingwood.

Although this story is, in part, about sex (nothing wrong with that!) and how it is good at any age, there is nothing to offend at all. All the 'sexy bits' are handled with such excellent humour and a total absence of smut that potential embarrassment should rise up and disappear like a morning mist on a sunny day. This is a cleverly written and beautifully directed play, crazy funny in spots, but maintaining a decorum that is parlour room fine.

So, here is a brief synopsis of the whole: we open to a daughter's (Sarah) return to her mother's home after 20 years, as Sarah's marriage seems to have failed. The mother, Gail, is also on her own after her husband and the wife of their neighbour and best friend, Earl, took off together, 20 years ago.

During that long time, Earl, as we learn, has been involved with a series of ladies, with whom he has attempted to keep a policy of NSA 'no strings attached' having had all of 'strings' or love that he cares to.

Gail, on the other hand has given herself over to the keeping of bees and has lived a life of celibacy all that time. She has become uptight and censorious, ready to snap at all around those around her.

Those include the neighbour and still her good friend, Earl, who is on hand to fix things around the house, rent her fields for his crops and be a friend. He even confides to her about his affairs with the ladies and otherwise.

Into all this comes the awkward young man, Benjamin, a student studying bees and their decline, which, as science is increasingly showing, is, in large part, due to the pesticides which farmers, like Earl, use on their crops.

In a conversation with Mark Crawford, he remarked about the writing of this play, 'The basis is to think about a good story and then, see what form the play will take. The inspiration for Earl comes from looking at who the audience is in most theatres. Lots of them are over 50 and I wanted to write a play that dealt with sex with characters who are the same age as many of the people in the audience. *Birds and the Bees* is interested in a re-awakening. I think this matters.'

This is an all new cast to the main stage but we can imagine their being welcomed back at future times and productions.

Rose Napoli is terrific as Sarah, the strung-out daughter, so frustrated with her dud husband and the sudden crumbling of that relationship. She delivers this angst Monty Python-comical, wringing her hands in an explosion that is pure hyperbole. When things turn in an unexpected way, she is funny about that too.

Her mother, tall, autocratic, robust Gail, is played by Susan Johnston-Collins, who gives the role exactly what it needs to handle her situation with the right, light touch. As she comes to the moment of decision, she plunges in with the energetic humour that has carried her this far.

Dear old Earl, with Sheldon Davis in the role, has the heart of a youth and explains his point of view irresistibly laughable. Like the other characters, he has his moments of seriousness and he is not kidding! Except for himself. This is not your typical Don Juan, in spite of his many successes. Short-ish, bearded at random, a farmer without any 'suave,' Earl proves that not only still waters can run deep.

Youngest and newest to the biz, is Michael Pearson as Benjamin 'Ben'. He holds his own absolutely as the shy, bumbling young man, attempting to keep in the good graces of Gail and failing magnificently. He is there to investigate and understand scientifically why the bees 'an ecological necessity to planet earth and the human race ' are failing. His solutions all 'round cause more conflict and a bit of confusion, seeking for some resolutions, even in this one small corner of the world.

No surprise but ever happy to state it, the set for this production is really clever the way Beckie Morris, set designer, has made it work. So simple, not basic, mind you, yet everything the story needs.

The lighting is understated, as it should be, influencing the mood and indicating where things are going. The lights do go off between scenes and audiences can relax: it is not intermission until the house lights go up.

This is a debut professional Directorship for Jane Spence. She has clearly worked diligently and done her job very well. Speaking to Susan Johnston-Collins during the Opening Night reception after the performance, she commented, 'Jane is obviously a natural as director. She was so professional and caring about how she directed this play, it was as though she'd been doing it for years. I'd work with her any time.'

As for the Director herself? She was effervescent, glowing, overjoyed. She deserved all that and more.

Tickets for *The Birds* and *The Bees* are available, as always, at the Box Office, 87 Broadway (Town Hall) and the Information Centre at Buena Vista and Highway 10; by telephone at 519-942-3423 and online at theatreorangeville.ca