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Barrymore

Good People Theater Company at
Greenway Court

Reviewed by Melinda Schupmann



Gordon Goodman

Photo by Kimberly Fox

Known as *The Great Profile*, John Barrymore was considered one of the finest actors of his time. With a handsome visage and notable theatrics, he was praised by all and emulated later by a succession of actors including Laurence Olivier and Alec Guinness.

In playwright William Luce's tribute to Barrymore's legend, actor Gordon Goodman takes on the daunting task of capturing the essence of this man whose brilliance was legendary and whose alcoholism and profligate ways destroyed his career.

It is 1942, and Barrymore has rented a theater where he will play Richard III, a role that had been a hallmark of his acting career in the '20s. He jauntily enters the stage, pushing a rack of costumes, singing "I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo," and exuding charm. Though Barrymore seems a bit unstable, he sets about engaging the audience. Speaking from backstage, his loyal prompter, Frank (Matt Franta, adding a fine counterbalance), interrupts Barrymore's musings with orders to start rehearsing. He is aware that this is probably Barrymore's final chance to revive his fading career.

The bits of biography Barrymore shares are enlightening. His father, Maurice, was a famous actor in his time, but alcohol and syphilis caused madness and death when he was in his mid-50s. John feared he would follow in his father's footsteps.

As the play progresses, Barrymore recounts tales of his several marriages and children and speaks fondly of sister, Ethel, and brother, Lionel, also accomplished actors. Barrymore relates that he first wanted to be an artist, as did Lionel, and Ethel wanted to be a pianist. They all, however, went into "the family business."

The script is challenging, as it requires the actor to intersperse lines from the various Shakespearean plays earlier performed by Barrymore, which interrupts the general narrative. Goodman is clearly passionate in his portrayal. By the second act, dressed as Richard, Barrymore lapses into moments of histrionics that almost seem a parody of his earlier abilities. He becomes more erratic, and it is clear that he is failing. He died in 1942.

Director Janet Miller allows Goodman much latitude in his characterization. Barrymore was larger than life, and Goodman gives it all he's got. Scott Walewski's authentically theatrical set and Kathy Gillespie and Barbara Weisel's costumes are apt, especially a handsome double-breasted suit with a perfect '40s fedora. Katherine Barrett's lighting is problematic, as the lights brighten and dim, sometimes distractingly, with a frequency that interrupts the flow of the story. Allowing the story line to take care of the mood may serve the play better.

Christopher Plummer originated this play in New York to critical acclaim, and Goodman is a worthy successor. It is an interesting look into theatrical history.

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Nov. 9-Dec. 1. 544 N. Fairfax Blvd. (Free parking adjacent to the theater.) Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 7pm. \$26. (323) 655-7679, ext. 100.

www.GoodPeopleTheaterCo.org