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BWW Reviews: Actor Gordon Goodman Offers Memorable BARRYMORE Performance for GPTC

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Barrymore by William Luce/directed by Janet Miller/Good People Theatre Company (GPTC)/Greenway Court ALLIANCE THEATRE/through December 1

In one line of William Luce's *Barrymore*, Jack (Gordon Goodman) says, "A King am I, shreds and patches", aptly describing his own pitiful condition as he prepares to revive his 1920 Broadway triumph as Richard III in 1942, one month before his death. In a rare revival of *Barrymore* by Janet Miller's newly formed Good People Theatre Company (GPTC), currently onstage at the Greenway Court ALLIANCE THEATRE through December 1, the best thing about this play is the actor who plays the tragic John Barrymore, namely Gordon Goodman.

When it premiered on Broadway in 1997, the play was not a critical success, but Christopher Plummer won a Tony Award, making the role his own even though he was too old for it.

Barrymore was 60 at the time of his death in 1942. The play's framework is not based on truth, as Barrymore's comeback as Richard III never took place. Luce takes dramatic license and creates a reason for Barrymore's appearance at the peak of his demise during the final days of his life. Suffering from many ailments caused by alcoholism, Barrymore raises a toast to himself and his overplayed life, knowing full well he is facing the end. It's like a chain cigarette smoker who refuses to quit, claiming "I'm dying so what difference does it make." Luce intertwines some amusing career anecdotes scattered from here, there and everywhere, giving Barrymore an excuse to hold court - no pun intended - when he is supposed to be rehearsing Richard, whom he facetiously calls Richard *the Terd*. There is a second actor, a stage manager Frank (Matt Franta) who attempts to keep Barrymore on course, but to no avail. We only hear his voice, which is better, as it serves to keep the spotlight on the faltering leading man. Most of the stories Barrymore tells do not shock, surprise or titillate that much, but there is an undeniable sense of humor than comes through the sorrow that keeps the play moving along, and of course, Gordon Goodman's outstanding performance which is spot.on delightfully and skillfully executed.

Barrymore does a couple of wonderful impressions of his older brother Lionel and sister Ethel, who berated him for selling out to Hollywood, leaving the theatre at the top of his game. He also talks about his marriages, all four of them, dishing the wives "divorces cost more than the marriages, but they are worth it". The man who really wanted to become a painter calls acting not an art, but "a scavenger's profession". All of the self-loathing, negativity that Barrymore throws out makes the play difficult to watch. It becomes tedious, particularly in Act I, and if it weren't for the jokes and Goodman, the play just might die like Barrymore himself eventually does. In Act II, Barrymore is in costume as Richard and takes the throne, but as an actor he still cannot remember his lines, pooh poohs it in favor of telling amusing stories and irritates the hell out of Frank, who at one point walks off and tells him that he is wasting time, accomplishing nothing. But loyal friend that he is, as Barrymore pleads for him to stay, Frank does and finally Barrymore gives up, realizing full well that his attempt at reviving the play is futile.

I have to hand it to **Janet Miller**. Her staging of the piece is impeccable and she allows Goodman the freedom to strut his stuff. Miller just inaugurated GPTC with *A Man of No Importance* last summer, which was a tremendous accomplishment. It's a wee Irish musical with a big cast and some pretty challenging staging, but Miller carried it off brilliantly. There is certainly variety in her choices for this company, as she now shifts to a tiny cast and **Barrymore**. It is obvious that we can expect many great surprises, big and small, from GPTC.