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Arts & Entertainment

Theater Review: 'Barymore'

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By Ben Miles



Kimberly Fox

Originally produced at the Stratford Festival of Canada in 1996, "Barymore," a play by William Luce, went onto Broadway in March of 1997. Christopher Plummer won a Tony Award for Best Performance by a Leading Actor in a Play by incarnating the celebrated actor John Barrymore in this 90 minute two-hander.

Now Luce's "Barymore" has found itself a perfect Los Angeles theater, thanks to the Good People Theater Company, in which to convey the intimate details of the legendary life of stage and screen luminary John Barrymore. Though there was silent film star John Gilbert – whose high-pitched voice doomed his career in talkies – and Rudolf Valentino, who died young, and, of course, trend-setting movie star Clark Gable, John Barrymore set the artistic standard for leading actors of the day and beyond.

Known for his handsome countenance, and often referred to as The Great Profile, Barrymore's Shakespearian abilities were consummate. Indeed, Barrymore's portrayals of "Hamlet" and "Richard III" are considered as model performances to this day.

The play opens in 1942, on a sparse stage, in a New York theater (a convincing set design by Scott Walewski). Barrymore has rented the theater for a one night performance of "Richard III." With his initial appearance, it is clear that Barrymore (a remarkably charming and charismatic Gordon Goodman), clad in a beautifully tailored brown, double-breasted suit with tie and sporting a well-placed fedora (Kathy Gillespie and Barbara Weisel's costuming is impressive), has been imbibing alcohol as he sings (in right key and fine tone) the 1942 hit-parade leader, "I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo."

As he prepares for his remounting of "Richard III" – from which we hear and see much dialogue and gesticulation – Barrymore is aided by Frank, an unseen stage assistant (played with much nuance and emotionality by Matt Franta), with whom he rehearses lines. Of course, playwright Luce uses the cue mix ups and line misreading as not only a source of humor, but also as insight into the delicate craft of acting.

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For those interested in the art of theater, the craft of acting and more Barrymore family lore (John Barrymore is the grandfather of current-day movie star Drew Barrymore), "Barrymore," directed with care and creativity by Janet Miller, provides some entertaining lessons. For those who are aficionados of the theater and connoisseur outstanding performances, Gordon Godwin's channeling of John Barrymore in "Barrymore" is well worth the time and attention it requires.

"Barrymore" continues at the Greenway Court Theatre in Los Angeles, through December 1. The theater is located at 544 North Fairfax Avenue. Evening performances are Fridays and Saturdays at 8 p.m. Matinees are Saturdays and Sundays at 2 p.m. For reservations, call (323) 655 -7679, ext.100. For online ticketing, visit www.goodpoepletheaterco.org.

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