

Cuckoo's Nest Fills Lee Center's Stage

By Brad Hathaway for the Alexandria Gazette-Packet

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The Port City Playhouse production of "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" — the stage adaptation of Ken Kesey's novel, which was later turned into a well-known movie starring Jack Nicholson — is a fascinating and satisfying drama featuring strong performances from its leading characters and quite a few intriguing portrayals in supporting roles. It opened this weekend at the Nannie J. Lee Center on Jefferson Street for a three-weekend run.

Port City has never shied away from challenging material, even during the days when it produced its plays in a high-school lecture hall with practically no stage. Now that it has the comparatively commodious stage at the Lee Center's theater, it continues to seek out works that challenge not only the performers but the designers. The successful transition from tiny to spacious is marked by its newest production, which offers not only fine performances but also the creation of a raucous, complex environment in its on-stage recreation of the near-bedlam of the day room of a mental hospital in 1960.

John Downing's set never actually fills the Lee Center's large stage, but there are set pieces enough to create an environment that gives members of the large cast plenty of room to create their own little worlds. The main element is the back wall of the hospital's day room with a big picture window into the nurse's station. The structure is flanked by two large, slowly spinning fans, which establish an industrial feel for the room. The large stage is left open for different groupings of inmates playing cards, watching television, milling about and acting out.

Into this comparatively ordered world of disordered minds is introduced a new inmate whose tolerance for regimentation is low and whose leadership skills are high. That role is played with a larger-than-life sense of energy and a roguish charisma by Bruce Ward. This newcomer's unorthodox behavior threatens the tight ship run by ward supervisor Nurse Ratched, played with just enough humanity lurking beneath her officiousness by Barbara Raffaele.

THE STORY OF THE STRUGGLE for control of the inmates' world, between Ward's free-thinking rogue and Raffaele's control freak, is the central feature of the plot, but it is the collection of characters who inhabit the day room that make the novel and the original play and the movie all strike resonant chords. In Port City's production the collection is a particularly rich one, with superb performances in even the smaller roles.

The show opens with narration that is really the ramblings of an American Indian inmate played with great dignity by Andrew Brownstein. He communes with his spirits until drawn out of his apparently impenetrable shell by the newcomer's ability to communicate with people. His drawing from his reserve is an emotional highlight of the evening.

Christopher C. Holbert is touching as a withdrawn introvert, whose virginity is a topic of teasing among the patients. Robert Krause is marvelous as an imp of an inmate who is drawn out of his own shell by the newcomer, and Randy Tusing is good as the inmate who probably had the most influence on the others before Ward's newcomer arrived. Most impressive in the small roles, however, is Robert Heinly as a massive inmate with a crucifixion complex.

Not all the nice work in smaller parts comes from those with roles as patients. Cal Whitehurst is very good as the doctor who has previously been cowed by the head nurse, but who finds just enough backbone at a key point in the story to partially redeem himself and bolster his own self-image, and Laura Russell is a breath of fresh air from the outside world as the newcomer's visiting girlfriend. Together, these supporting players create a complex, touching and very human world in which the story of the main characters takes place. Theater is often at its best when it is an ensemble effort. Director Bob Bartlett has succeeded in obtaining a fine ensemble effort to make "One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" a notable evening of theater.

Where & When:

"One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest" plays Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. through Oct. 16, with a Tuesday evening performance at 8 p.m. on Oct. 12 as well. Performances are at the Nannie J. Lee Center, 1108 Jefferson St. Tickets are \$10-\$12. Call 703-838-2880, or log on to www.portcityplayhouse.com.

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