

October 1 - 16, 2004

Reviewed October 1

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

Running time 2:30 - one intermission

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Port City continues to chose challenging fare and then to give the pieces substantial productions that demand respect. In this, their latest mounting of a serious play with a strong view of the value of the human spirit, they again find a way to people the world of the principals with strongly drawn supporting characters, creating an environment that captures the attention of the audience and makes the central stories the richer for the contrasts and textures they provide. Of course, *Cuckoo's Nest*, by its very nature, provides plenty of opportunities for broadly drawn characters - it is set, after all, in a mental institution filled with patients who are confined precisely because they do not hue to the mainstream. In this production, each of the occupants of the day room of the institution are strongly drawn, intriguing characters, while the principals - the controlling head nurse and the newcomer who threatens the established order of things - are fully fleshed out.



Storyline: Into the day room of a mental institution one day in 1960 comes a new patient, one whose respect for authority is as low as his tolerance for routine. He shakes up the established order maintained by the attending nurse and stirs the emotions of his fellow patients, but at a cost.

Dale Wasserman's 1963 stage adaptation of Ken Kesey's novel provided a great role for Kirk Douglas' last appearance on Broadway. Its revival earned Gary Sinise his second Tony Award nomination as an actor, and its movie adaptation gave Jack Nicholson his first Oscar-winning role. Obviously, it is a play that can be performed as a star vehicle. The secret of success for this production, however, is that it is an ensemble piece, not a star turn. That is not to say that Bruce Ward is lacking in the lead role - he's as flamboyant as could be wanted. He captures both the extroverted energy of the new patient and the insecurities that drive him to an anti-establishment position of leadership. In director Bob Bartlett's hands, however, that leadership isn't so far out front of the troops that he leaves them behind. No, the colorful members of the pack are the real story here.

The collection of colorful inhabitants of the mental institution is varied indeed. There is uptight, prissy Randy Tusing providing a counterbalance to Ward's extravagant energy. There is Christopher C. Holbert's tightly contained intensity as the virginal inmate whose attraction to Laura Russell's good-time-girl triggers tragic consequences, and there is Robert Kraus' juvenile-to-infantile innocence adding to the mix. Even smaller parts are cleanly constructed. Robert Heinly's lumbering patient who can be immobilized by imaginary crucifixion nails is a haunting image throughout. Best of all, however, is Andrew Brownstein as the Native American Chief whose ruminations form the narration of the play.

The key role of the head nurse, whose control of her domain is threatened by Ward's character's unorthodox manner, is well played by Barbara Raffaele who hovers behind the plate glass window of the nurse's station overlooking the day room set that John Downing designed which leaves the large stage of the Lee Center Theater open for group scenes. With less fully formed characters, such open space would highlight the need for diversity and contrast. As it is, however, the cast provides ample variety and color to make this visit to the Cuckoo's nest an intriguing evening.

Written by Dale Wasserman based on the novel by Ken Kesey. Directed by Bob Bartlett. Design: John Downing (set) Eileen Farrell (costumes) Julie Kiley (makeup, hair and wigs) Joanne Tompkins (properties) Dick Schwab (lights) Anna Hawkins (sound) Doug Olmsted (photography) Donna Reynolds (stage manager). Cast: Matthew Anderson, Andrew Brownstein, Juliette Kelsey Changner, Arthur Greene, William Guey-Lee, Robert Heinly, Christopher C. Holbert, Zeke Johnson, Matthew Jordan, Robert Kraus, Sara Joy Lebowitz, Rob Perkins, Barbara Raffaele, Laura Russell, David Swim, David M. Thomas, Randy Tusing, Cal Whitehurst, Bruce Ward.