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Poignant Comedy Is 'Turn' for the Better

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Alexandria's Port City Playhouse has had a sparkling 2002-03 season, producing some of the most successful dramas of any local theater company this past year. Now, as a nice dessert offering, it is closing the season with a comedy with poignant overtones, "Wrong Turn at Lungfish," showing that it is every bit as adept with lighter fare as with intense drama.

"Wrong Turn at Lungfish" was written by television and film director Garry Marshall ("Happy Days" and "Pretty Woman") and his longtime collaborator, Lowell Ganz. Two disparate characters, one a blind and dying intellectual, the other a streetwise but unschooled young woman, find common ground in a grim hospital room.

The title comes from a disjointed conversation about the process of evolution, in which the lungfish, of course, plays a pivotal role. Directed by Suni Chapman, there are no wrong turns here, and her strong cast nicely negotiates several problematic plot twists.

The heart of the play is the pairing of a mismatched couple. Chapman has put local veteran Joe Jenckes, who pretty much holds the patent on playing cranky but lovable curmudgeons in such wonderful shows as Little Theatre of Alexandria's "On Golden Pond" two seasons ago, together with young Elisabeth Marinelli (LTA's "The Heiress").

Jenckes' Peter Ravenswaal has lost his wife, his sight and will soon lose his battle to live. A prickly codger, he has alienated most of the hospital staff. Into his constricting world bounds Marinelli's Anita Merendino, a volunteer reader with a nasal screech of a voice and a sunny personality. Peter's bitterness just bounces off Anita's shell, and she is often blissfully unaware of many of his jibes as she draws the old professor out.

The duo is magic together. Jenckes' sarcastic drawl and Marinelli's ability to combine innocent wonder and scrappy sass are a delightful mix as they get past a rough start and reach toward understanding and acceptance of each other's foibles.

Peter gets to indulge in slow burns and outbursts of exasperation with the literal-minded Anita, while Marinelli displays exquisite comic timing and vocal dexterity. Marinelli faces extra challenges, as Marshall and Ganz have given her character unsavory baggage that threatens to make her much less likable than she appears at the outset. But the actress finesses these moments with skill.

Jenckes is also quite convincing at appearing to be a man not accustomed to being blind, still trying to cling to his independence.

Also on hand is the versatile Chuck Dluhy, playing a heavy this time as Dominic De Caesar, Anita's rather nasty boyfriend, who provides a harsh reality check for the burgeoning friendship between the older man and the young woman. Jane Petkofsky is a tough nurse we never get to like much, even as she displays some of her own vulnerabilities toward the end.

This is a witty play, sometimes engrossing and often extremely funny. The main characters are not without serious flaws, which gives added resonance to how they overcome their shortcomings. The authors have added several unpleasant elements that may seem out of place in what is essentially a comedy, elements that do not all seem necessary. But Chapman's brisk pacing doesn't allow the moments to linger and spoil the overall effect.

Marinelli has done a wonderful job costuming her character, finding a variety of colorful ensembles that accent Anita's bold but unrefined personality. All of the action takes place in Frank Pasqualino's solid-looking hospital room, painted in a horrid industrial green.

Port City Playhouse has a provocative mix of plays new and old planned for next season, and its move this year to a substantially larger performance venue doesn't seem to have affected its trademark intimate style.

"Wrong Turn at Lungfish" by Port City Playhouse runs through May 17 at Nannie J. Lee Center, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria. Showtime is 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, with an 8 p.m. performance next Tuesday. For tickets, call 703-838-2880.

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