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## Compelling Port City Production Deserves a Full House

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It is truly a shame when the behind-the-scenes people fail to support those brave individuals who step out into the bright lights and put themselves on the line. And that's exactly what happened on opening night Friday for Port City Playhouse's debut production, Kenneth Lonergan's "The Waverly Gallery," in their new Alexandria venue.

What happened on the stage was perfect, a sometimes funny, often searing look at a family dealing with the ravages of Alzheimer's disease. What happened in the audience was heartbreaking. You could count the paying customers on one hand, a few warm bodies scattered among several hundred empty seats in the well-appointed theater of the Nannie J. Lee Center.

Port City Playhouse had good attendance at its former location, a cramped and technically deficient stage, but here the producers and public relations people did not do their jobs, seemingly ignoring advance publicity and the normal routines for building an audience. For instance, we'd love to show you a picture of the fine cast in action, but Port City could not even provide a photo.

This review will do their work for them and suggest that you see "The Waverly Gallery." You will enjoy a thoroughly compelling evening of theater.

Directed by Catalina Smith, the five cast members make magic happen, appearing to go beyond the artifice of theater to create real life with laughter and tears onstage. They rise well above Lonergan's flawed script, a story too thinly written in places and with lurching advances in time and plot that create challenges for the cast in calibrating the evolution of their characters.

Gladys, superbly played by Mary Blake Suib, is a talkative, feisty grandmother fighting to retain her independence even as Alzheimer's disease, which is never mentioned onstage, increasingly robs her of the ability to do so. The owner of a small Greenwich Village art gallery, she has led a full life. But as her world collapses in on her, it is Gladys's family that bears the burden.

Perhaps because Lonergan was writing from real-life experience involving his own grandmother, much of the story is filtered through grandson Daniel, played with remarkable naturalness by Kevin Price, who frequently speaks directly to the audience. His frustration and helplessness are palpable when he eventually says of his grandmother: "The person she was hadn't been around for a long time. Her mind was smashed to pieces. But they were her pieces."

This is a family in crisis, yet Gladys is oblivious to her diminishing capabilities, unaware she is at the center of turmoil. Frustration with Gladys mounts slowly, but it is a steady progression, taxing patience and, perhaps, love. Finally, her degeneration overcomes and emotionally paralyzes Gladys, creating a daunting quandary for the family.

Suib's performance is a major accomplishment. She carefully adjusts Gladys's descent from a natural idiosyncrasy into disorientation and pulls off the near-impossible: making us enjoy and be irritated by Gladys simultaneously. At the end of the play, Gladys has faded away without offering any closure to an

audience that has come to care for her, mirroring real life but robbing the play of dramatic force. Price, however, brilliantly and sensitively fills the vacuum in a moving climactic monologue.

The rest of the cast is uniformly effective, with Kevin Gauntner as Don, a struggling, untalented artist befriended by Gladys; Debbie Bengston Kosak as Ellen, Gladys's concerned but self-absorbed daughter; and Michael Meller as befuddled and brusque son-in-law Howard.

Scenes with the family at the dining room table are remarkable for the ultra-realistic pacing director Smith employs. The rapid-fire, overlapping dialogue highlights Gladys's increasing inability to remain relevant in her family's life.

Despite the near-empty house opening night, cast members gave 100 percent of themselves onstage, a tribute to them as performers and as people.

*"The Waverly Gallery," performed by Port City Playhouse, is playing at the Nannie J. Lee Center, 1108 Jefferson St., Alexandria, through Nov. 16. Showtimes are 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays and 8 p.m. Nov. 12. For tickets or information, call 703-838-2880.*

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