

Westside Theatre Reviews

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MASK & MIRROR TAMES THE CURIOUS SAVAGE



Sarah Thornton, Carl Coughlan, Patti Speight, Rebecca Rowland Hines, Gary Romans, Jan Rosenthal, and Karlyn Weaver.

By Tina Arth and Darrell Baker

Almost 65 years ago, John Patrick's *The Curious Savage* opened in New York City – and it has since become a community theater staple. It is easily staged, family friendly, touchingly funny, and (unlike many vintage comedies), it has held up remarkably well, perhaps because it is much more than a series of one-liners and cheap jokes. In the deft hands of director Linda Talluto, the current Mask & Mirror production of the show takes full advantage of these features. The result is an entertaining and thought provoking production that helps the audience question society's boundaries between and definitions of sanity and mental illness.

The story is set in "The Cloisters," a genteel mental asylum that treats its residents more like guests than inmates. Wealthy widow Ethel P. Savage is facing commitment by her greedy and venal stepchildren, who are horrified that she is spending what they consider "their" money on a foundation that helps people achieve their hopes and dreams. Proof of her insanity? Ethel has begun pursuing her own dream of being an actress – what could be crazier? Five residents eagerly await Ethel's arrival, and quickly charm her with their quirky but harmless behavior. Unlike Ethel's stepchildren (a Senator, a judge, and a much-married socialite) the denizens of The Cloisters are fundamentally good and gentle souls, loyal and protective of

their “family” – the other inmates. Ultimately, Ethel decides to live out her life at The Cloisters, administering her foundation from within its sheltering walls as she learns that the bars on the window really are not to keep the inmates in, but to keep the world out.

Karlyn Weaver (“Florence”) watches over her fellow inmates with the intensity of a mother hen; while sometimes strident and domineering, her presence provides order and security to the others. Stephen Radley (as the shell-shocked pianist “Jeffrey”) is quietly endearing, and Radley’s shy and tentative performance subtly expresses his post-war aversion to all conflict. Comedienne Sarah Thornton is lovably hilarious as the plain and emotionally needy Fairy May, bobbing in and out of reality with a sure sense of timing and injecting just the right notes of pathos when appropriate.

Senator Titus (one of the evil stepchildren) is the slimiest politician in Washington, and Carl Coughlan performs as though he was born to the role. He is apoplectic, scheming, and convincing as the only congressman so unpopular that he is barred from the White House. Patti Speight (as stepdaughter Lily Belle) brings a brassiness that belies her haughty demeanor; we easily believe that she could change husbands as often as she changes her garish hats.

Gary Romans is well cast as the kindly, if somewhat befuddled, Dr. Emmett, who clearly has his patients’ best interests at heart. Jayne Furlong (“Nurse Willie”) projects both the crisp orderliness of a head nurse and an unexpected tenderness toward all of her charges.

The story revolves around the character of Ethel Savage, and Jan Rosenthal is a fine actress who easily navigates the character’s development throughout the show. She is often funny, always warm, and wonderfully devious in her dealings with the evil stepchildren.

Nick Hamilton and Cindy Zimmerman have outdone themselves with the beautiful set that immediately tells the audience all they need to know about the ambience at The Cloisters. Viola Pruitt’s costumes are inventive, eye-catching, and very appropriate to the period.

Mask & Mirror’s production of *The Curious Savage* runs through Sunday, May 10th at Calvin Church, 10445 SW Canterbury Lane, Tigard with shows Friday and Saturday at 7:30 pm and Sunday at 2:00 pm.