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Theater Review: Acting underscored in play



Giselle Wolf and Max Roeg in the Victory Theatre Center production of "Molly." (Photo by Tim Sullens)

By Dink O'Neal

Fortunately, excellent acting and first-rate production values help to shore up a rather slow-moving story as Burbank's Victory Theatre Center presents "Molly" by playwright Simon

Gray.

Gray's tale of a British woman whose selfish desires leads from adultery to murder suffers from a pedantic first half and a second act that feels rushed and somehow incomplete.

To their credit, Director Jeffery Passero and company manage as good a job as is possible given the script's inherent weaknesses.

Heading up the company in the title role is Giselle Wolf, whose expertise lies in her ability to make this character simultaneously endearing and maddening.

Molly's need for excitement and personal satisfaction leads to personal choices that damage everyone with whom she comes in contact.

Wolf demonstrates this child-like mentality without ever crossing over the line into caricature. Molly wants what she wants and will do whatever it takes to achieve it.

Her unsuspecting husband, Teddy, suffers from hearing impairment, a condition meant perhaps to underscore his complete ignorance of Molly's behavior.

Don Moss plays Teddy with a charming jocularly that dissolves sharply into frustration and anger when he sees his wife for what she truly is.

It's a 180-degree turn that Moss delivers with chilling acuity.

Their housekeeper, Eve, played by Anne Gee Byrd, has a special place in her heart for Teddy.

She nurses him through his infirmities, listening to his rambling conversational topics and protecting him from the truth as long as she can.

And, as her character realizes the horrors that Molly has wrought, Byrd's work is nothing short of flawless as we see her agonizing over a situation she is helpless to repair.

The odd man out in this tale is Oliver, a village teenager hired on by Molly as gardener and handyman. Max Roeg handles this multifaceted character with a beautifully understated performance, particularly in those scenes where the character's immaturity manifests itself.

Predicting where Molly's and Oliver's relationship is heading requires very little brainpower as Gray concludes his extremely long-winded first act.

Conversely, the second act rips along, seeming to skip steps that would support the story's logic and prevent what is an otherwise confusing conclusion.

That having been said, Passero's direction is effective and bolstered by a gorgeously appointed drawing room set credited to designer Elizabeth Hayden-Passero.

Rob Corn's sound design details the English countryside — crickets, feathered wildlife, even a rainstorm — while capturing the 1930s setting with recognizable musical selections of the era.

Costuming by Carole H. Beule is nicely supportive of the time period as well.

In the end, however, it's all a strangely diametric opposition — a nicely performed production of an otherwise not so interesting play.