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A ghost in the writing

Bagaduce Theatre closes season with a haunting tale

Reviewed by Nan Lincoln

Brooksville: It was a gorgeous storm-washed day, on Sunday and my spirits were high as I headed off, with a friend to see the Bagaduce Theatre's final production of the season, "Bird of Passage" a new play by Colby Halloran.

Not only was it exciting to see another production by this excellent theatre troupe—a happy combination of local amateur talent and professional stage and screen actors – there is always a special thrill of anticipation that comes with the opportunity to see a new work premiered.

While Halloran has published a number of novels and short stories, this is her first full-length play and by some stroke of good fortune, theatre magic or simply knowing the right people, "Bird of Passage" found its way to the perfect stage to make its debut.

For one thing it is set on Orr's Island – a real Maine island (well, at high tide anyway) in a remote and rustic saltwater farmhouse that seems uncannily similar to the Theatre's own rustic and remote location in a large meadow bordered by the Bagaduce River.

Set designer John Vivian, who earlier this summer transformed the theater's performance space into an elegant, sun-drenched summer cottage for Noel Coward's "Hay Fever," has this time created an authentic-looking, unreconstructed, no frills, Maine interior, complete with potbellied stove, shabby, but comfortable furniture and ancient appliances. A large hunt-and-peck typewriter and a handsome, scarlet 1960s

era record player in the bookshelf hint that some writing is going to be happening and maybe some romance.

The thin, wan lighting that manages to seep into this dark interior suggests it is midwinter; a clue that is born out when the door bursts open and two bundled-up women enter stamping snow off their feet.

Marilyn, a real estate agent, played with brusque officiousness by Annie O'Sullivan, reminding me of every real estate agent I have ever encountered, is angry the moment she walks in – the door is unlocked, there are mouse turds everywhere, she's freezing, certain she is wasting her and her client's time and has a lot to say about it. Her client, Ginn, on the other hand, is practically speechless as she stares at the rude room with either wonder or horror, we are not sure which, until she interrupts the agent's litany of complaints to say, "I'll take it."

Thus begins the strange literary, spiritual and romantic adventure that is "Bird of Passage."

Ginny, played by one of those talented local actors, Sally Mills, is an Iowa gal who has been leading a rather peripatetic life since selling the family farm. She has been traveling about the world to largely remote places, trying, without much success, to find a sense of belonging. She also has an idea for a book that she is hoping to write in the peace and solitude of a Maine winter on Orr's Island.

Solitude, she soon discovers, is relative. Her closest neighbor Rosie (the marvelous Monique Fowler) who used to housekeep for the former owner, the late Lawrence S. Hall, a writer and literature professor of some renown, is a frequent visitor, dispensing pearls of advice and wisdom and swilling vodka --something she and her late employer used to enjoy, along with other comforts, together.

While Fowler's Maine accent tends to meander to the south, to the British Isles and a few stops in between, we don't care. She is such a delightful and commanding stage presence we want to shout out a welcoming "Rosie!" like Norm in the TV show *Cheers*, every time she comes through the door.

When she is finally alone in the house, Ginny learns that she is actually not alone at all. Prof. Hall – played by one of those excellent professional actors – Robert Burke – it appears, despite being dead for a year or so, is still in residence and for Ginny – the only one who can see him – a very corporeal presence.

“Oh,” I think at this point. “This is going to be like *The Ghost and Mrs. Muir!*” which happens to be one of my favorite old movies with a very young Rex Harrison and Jean Tierney.

Well yes and no. While Mr. Burke’s professor is just as charmingly domineering as the ghostly sea captain in the movie – and pretty darn handsome to boot – and while he is not above unlocking and slamming a few doors, his ghostly shenanigans are pretty tame. The dialogue also is more pedantic than witty verbal sparring as the professor is not so much interested in bedeviling “intruders” but in getting back to his teaching. He finds Ginny the perfect protégé – talented, unformed and eager to learn from a master.

The writing advice he gives Ginny is good – “I want you to show me lonely without using the word lonely” and he has a knack for pulling out of her the parts of the story she doesn’t want to share – “Good! Put it in!” he shouts when he uncovers one of these buried treasures.

Mills does a fine job of evolving her character from a guarded, caustic and closed-off woman to someone who allows her ghostly mentor to kindle in her a warm spark of enthusiasm; not just for the writing project, but for her life.

While the romantic chemistry between the two never really materializes convincingly, their affair of the mind steams up nicely and in one of the plays most poignant scenes, even produces a literary child as they collaborate on a story the professor wants to pursue.

The playwright who hails from Ann Arbor, Mich, has clearly spent some time in coastal Maine and her observations – most of which she gives to Rosie to make – are spot on. Such as when she tells Ginny she’d have more luck finding true solitude in Manhattan than a remote Maine island, where like it or not, everyone will soon get to know your business, as well as her understanding of the complicated dynamic between natives, long-term summer residents, people from away and tourists.

Once again, this visit to the Bagaduce Theatre in Brooksville was well worth the trip and I look forward to seeing the adventures they will take their audiences on next season.