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'Vinegar Tom' offers impressive, timeless storytelling

by Scott McCrea / For the News-Miner

In "Vinegar Tom," director Stephen Golux makes an impressive debut at the helm of his first Theatre UAF production. It is a hauntingly passionate production with a story line that, while based in 17th century Britain, contains themes that could take place in any century, even the one we are in now.

Though today one does not find witchhunts similar to the ones depicted in the play, we can find similar examples where one's ignorance and fear can lead them to committing atrocities against another human being. The idea people have that if they do not understand something or someone it must be stopped is an age-old one that, sadly, doesn't seem to be showing any signs of going away.

Written in 1976 by Caryl Churchill at the height of the 20th century's second feminist movement, "Vinegar Tom" centers in on a young woman named Alice, excellently played by Carrie Baker. Outspoken, strong-headed and unabashedly sexually charged, she is the 17th century version of Chelsea Handler. This was not, of course, how women were supposed to act in that era (or the next one, or the one after that, etc.). So when the village begins suffering hardships (bad weather, failing crops) townsfolk suspect witchcraft, and Alice, with her "different" ways, seems a likely target.

She's not alone. There's also Betty (Rhi Johnson) who is considered mentally ill because she does not want to marry. Alice's bitter mother, Joan (Jenny Schlotfeldt) is gone after as well, as is the town's "cunning woman" (Ana Gagnes Hawes) who is a practitioner of alternative medicine. Susan (Katie Sousa) is examined for marks of the devil because of her fear of childbirth. Finally, there's Margery (Christina Welch) who manages to avoid persecution but has her own living hell in an abusive marriage with her cheating husband, Jack (Sergio Santana).

Throughout the play these women suffer abuses after abuses, from name-calling and mental anguish to sexual humiliation and public hangings. It's a disturbing and at times raw production that might trouble some, but, sorry folks, the world of oppression is not a cheerful one.

The production's greatest strength can be found in the solid cast that Golux assembled. Normally a behind-the-scenes person, Baker delivers a powerful performance as Alice. Schlotfeldt, who has always been one of my favorite Fairbanks Shakespeare Theatre performers, continues to impress in this production. Other young but familiar faces to the Fairbanks stage such as Hawes and Sousa continue to shine.

Choosing to stage the production in the round was a good move, as it creates a very intimate connection between the audience and the performers. And, as if that didn't challenge the cast enough, there is also the musical aspect of the show, which features original music from UAF music professor James Bicigo. "Tom," however, is by no means a musical. Rather, the songs are used to provide additional commentary to the story line.

In my review a couple of weeks ago of "Antigone" I mentioned that the male thespians in this town have their work cut out for them if they are going to keep up with their female colleagues. After seeing "Vinegar Tom" I would like to make an addendum. It's not going to happen.

Women might have been burned at the stake as witches in the 17th century, but here in 21st century, in Fairbanks, Alaska, they are dominating the local theater scene. So guys, raise your hands and surrender, and sit back and enjoy the show. It's a damn good one.

"Vinegar Tom" runs through this weekend with performances at 8:15 p.m. Friday and Saturday night and Sunday at 2 p.m. You probably guessed this already, but the show does contain mature content. For more information contact Theatre UAF at 474-7751.

Scott McCrea has reviewed local theatre for several years now.