

“Normel People” Packs the House at Footlight

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by Carol Furtwangler

Perfectly
Normel
People

WHEN A THEATRE PRESENTATION is funny and smart, fast-paced and wise, word spreads like wildfire, especially at Festival time.

Judy and Thomas Burke Heath’s “Perfectly Normel People” has all those elements and more, resulting in SRO crowds at the Footlight Players Theatre for every performance of this Piccolo Spoleto world premiere.

Saturday night, the Heaths and their carefully-chosen cast of veteran actors enjoyed an overflow audience that showed their appreciation for every wise-crack, every taunt, every use of ribald language (and there are many) by laughing uproariously, clapping between scenes, and hopping up at play’s end with an extended standing ovation.

As native New Yorkers with intimate knowledge of ethnic cultures, the Heaths chose as their subject the proverbial

‘Farm Boy Comes to the Big City,’ taking full advantage of every opportunity to spoof how Hadley (re-christened “Lefty” for his own protection) adjusts to a big Italian family living in Queens in the early 1980s, a premise already rife with humor.

The two-hour-plus (with one intermission) memory play employs the gambit of ongoing narration, here touchingly provided by Sean X. Marino as the adult Hadley some twenty-six years later. Portraying his life among the Normellinos when he boarded with them during his first year at NYU, the 18 year-old Kansas-born “aspiring writer” (Bronson Taylor) is instantly considered part of the family.

And what a family! Thomas Burke Heath, co-writer and director as well, heads the large cast as older brother Johnny Normellino, exceedingly well supported by Lara Allred as sister Angela, Tripp Hamilton (cousin Frankie), Katie Holland (another cousin, Bernadette, and Hadley’s love interest), Paulette Bertolami (Aunt Connie), Jaqualine Helmer as Mama, and the inimitable Ross Magoulas as Pops.

The story unfolds in a series of scenes, each one funnier than the one before, as Hadley discovers Mama’s authentic lasagna is a far different dish than the one his Kansas family makes “with cottage cheese and ketchup.” He learns

from Johnny and Frankie how to walk the walk and talk the talk of an “Italian Stallion” in a brilliantly directed scene; to endure the constant, blue language wrangling among family members; and to develop a relationship with Pops.

While each scene is memorable, Hamilton (with acting in his blood as the son of PURE Theatre’s Sharon Graci) shines when Frankie interacts with the Holy Mother Mary, a vision appearing only to Frankie. Suffering from “attention delinquency disorder,” his misunderstanding of Hadley’s 50-cent vocabulary (“perspiring writer,” the intervention Hadley arranges to end the feud between Mama and her sister Connie “an intermezzo”) earns well-deserved, hearty laughter every time.

While most of these experienced actors, particularly Heath, Holland, Allred, and Scott Cason as Hadley’s father back in Kansas, exhibit expert comedic timing and know exactly how to project, too many lines go unheard as Mama begins to speak, often sotto voce, while the audience is still laughing loud and hard.

That said, this show by the Charleston husband-and-wife playwriting team, with a few nips and tucks, may well roll on to the New York stage and perhaps become a feature movie, guided inexorably by the Heaths’ extraordinary vision.