



Staten Island Advance

Sunday, October 9, 2011

'Catholic School Girls' come of age on Wagner College's Stage One this week

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA, Arts Editor

STATEN ISLAND, NY — Women own the local boards this month — a phenomenon that might have been remarkable years ago, but seems merely accidental today.

For the record: Harbor Lights Theater's southern beauty-parlor drama "Steel Magnolias" opened last week at Veterans Memorial Hall. "Catholic School Girls," a four-character satire, starts Tuesday in a Wagner College Stage One Studio production. Later this month "Ladies at the Alamo," Paul Zindel's Texas theater snarl-fest, receives a Staten Island Shakespearean Theater Company production (see the Local Arts Calendar on page 2 for show details).

Of the three, "Catholic School Girls" a 1982 play by Casey Kurtti, is the smallest and the least well-known, but it probably demands a little more of its cast than the others.

Four actresses play students at the St. George's Catholic School in Yonkers from ages 6 through 14, while doubling as the nuns who instruct them.

"It's quite an acting exercise," deadpanned director Mickey Tennenbaum last week.

The characters are Boomers. The first scene occurs in 1962, and the second is the following year, specifically Nov. 22, the day that John F. Kennedy, the first Irish Catholic president, was assassinated.

The timeframe is a long way from that of the cast (Heather Rae Kirschenbauer, Bronwyn Whittle, Mary De Borger and Brittney Santoro), who range in age from 19 to 21.

Tennenbaum, who directed Theresa Rebeck's "Loose Knit" last winter at Stage One, took special pains to orient them. He had his wife, Karen O'Donnell, and her sister, both local Catholic school products from the 1960s and 70s, talk about their experiences.

He also invited "some honest-to-God-fourth graders" to a rehearsal, so that the cast could get a close-up look at being 9 years old.

Last week the director answered some questions about the play, about teaching, growing up, surviving childhood and friendship.

Q: These are some funny, bossy, mouthy sisters, but they are not always very kind, are they?

A: I have spoken with a number of people who went to Catholic school in the 1960s and '70s, and they all agree that the portrayal of the nuns in "Catholic School Girls" is frighteningly accurate. Without exception, they have confirmed all of the actions depicted in the play. The sisters ran their classrooms with the proverbial iron fist, with corporal punishment as an accepted educational tool. Also commonplace was the use of insults and belittling to keep the students in line. One friend referred to her time in Catholic school as the "Reign of Terror."

Q: You were a teacher for years. Does the pupil-to-teacher interplay and vice versa sound familiar?

A: I would have to say —and hope to believe — that my teaching style was very different. I could never see the educational value of bullying and sarcasm. They seem counterproductive..

And corporal punishment in the public schools is, of course, against the law for good reason. But the main difference is in the attitude towards questioning. As shown in the play, anyone who questions the word of the nuns is questioning The Word itself. The nuns saw themselves as providing a direct line from God, so the word “infallible” becomes a tangible reality for these children.

Q: Is your undergraduate cast looking at “Catholic School Girls” as an ancient relic?

A: When we first read the play the actors had a hard time believing that the events depicted actually came from the author’s personal experience. Catholic schools today are very different. But as we did the research and listened to first-hand testimony from those who went through a similar experience, they began to see how the play is still relevant, and how this experience shaped the lives of people who are living with these memories today.

Q: It isn’t “Nonsense.” It’s not just about laughs. There’s a message. What would you say it is?

A: Every laugh in this play is accompanied by a memory pang — and sometimes a wince. In many ways, the grade school experience depicted in this play is universal. It’s more about the friendships forged in the classroom that can last a lifetime. It’s our friends that help us get through the traumatic events of childhood and the delicate process of growing up.

‘Catholic School Girls’

Casey Kurtti’s coming of age comedy, presented by the Wagner College Theater Department

Where: Stage One Studio Theater, 637 Howard Ave. (next to stadium), Grymes Hill

When: October 11-15, 8 p.m.; Oct. 15 & 16, 2 p.m.

How much: Admission is \$10

Reservations: Call the box office in Reynolds House at 718-390-3259