

Denting Yonkers' Heart of Steel

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Lost in Yonkers

by Neil Simon

Directed by **Randy Messersmith**

Arizona Jewish Theatre Company

The Viad Playhouse on the Park, Phoenix

(602) 264-0402

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\$26.00 - \$28.00 (\$7 Student Rush half hour before curtain)

Another weekend, another **Neil Simon**. However, as opposed to some of the scripts that could have been dusted off and cracked open, **Arizona Jewish Theatre Company** has chosen one of his best, most dramatic scripts. *Lost In Yonkers* netted the comedian a Pulitzer, and rightly so. Equal parts comedy and drama, Simon here creates comedy through life experiences and it is the organic nature of the laughter and tears that make this an enjoyable and moving piece. **Randy Messersmith** has been tapped to bring this recollection to life, and he has gathered a strong cast to step into Simon's conflicted characters.

Jay (**Ben Lebovitz**) and Arty (**Paul Thomson**) are being foisted onto their father Eddie's (**Bruce Laks**) mother, the steel-hearted Grandma Kurnitz (**Jacqueline Gaston**) after their mother dies and he must travel the South to make money to repay debts during WWII's scrap iron drive. Their aunt Bella (**Maria Amorocho**), a scattered dear whose childlike nature keeps her confined in Grandma's home uses this time to try to expand her horizons, and their ne'er-do-well uncle Louie

(**Cale Epps**) pays an unexpected visit, turning this upstairs apartment into a hideout. The ten months they spend together is tense and eventful, testing everyone's mettle.

The strength and power of this play is potentially undercut by the fact that it requires two early teenaged boys to carry a good part of the show. It is with their arrival and leaving that the play begins and ends, and though the bulk of the action lies with Bella and Grandma, they are the spiritual centers, a large task for any young actors to carry. In this situation, Messersmith is one-and-a-half of two. Thomson is an engaging Arty, always in the moment, strong in presentation, and quick on the comedy. His performance is remarkable. Lebovitz, however, is more tentative. He does ace several moments of drama, but during less dramatic moments, he seems to lose concentration and to recite rather than come up with his dialogue. Despite this, the two actors work together to create many strong moments.

Messersmith ensures success by making everyone nearly manic in their presentation save for the purposefully deliberate Gaston. Laks practically falls over his own feet with nerves as he tries to convince his steely mother to take the boys in. Epps is a hurricane of energy and bravado who finds the balance between likeable and shady. Amorocho is like a pinwheel as she spirals around the house. All the while, Gaston moves slowly through the scene, sucking the energy from those around her with her daunting accent and permanent scowl. It is just the right amount of frantic and fearful. They all shine.

Amarocho gives the audience a loveable ditz but hints at something more behind her wide eyes. Epps maneuvers his dominating stage presence into realms of

craftiness and showmanship. I have feared that he would fall into a constant in his performances because of his powerful presence, but here he adds playful to the repertoire to excellent effect. However, it is Gaston who offers a master class in performance. She fills in her character with a minimum of movement and business. It is her spare nature that speaks volumes as much as her well-chosen moments of action.

Messersmith does make one choice that goes against the script near the end. While I appreciated this move of Gaston's, my wife, who was seeing this for the first time, felt it undermined Grandma. I can see her point, but I'm a fan of choices over conventions, and stand my ground.

Kimb Williamson's set is excellent in construction, dressing, and creation of spaces, but I was not a fan of her choice for the images on the scrims that act as walls: It's an unsubtle and much repeated cliché. **Troy Buckey's** lighting is good and though it sometimes chooses isolations for more intense moments, they didn't call attention to themselves as much as they could have. **Lois K. Myers'** costumes are carefully researched and evoke the period well. **Bill Osborne's** sound design is effective.

Once again, I find myself in the uncomfortable position of recommending another production of Simon. I fear retribution from the society of cynics, of which I am a loyal member. However, its important to remember that he is an excellent writer and with the right director, designers, and cast, an entertaining evening is possible for all, even those of us who have seen his work way-too-many times.