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Theater review: 'The Foreigner'

Five stars for IU's 'The Foreigner'

By Connie Shakalis H-T Reviewer Jul 9, 2018



Mark Ulrich (Charlie) and Jimmy Hogan (Owen) in the Indiana University Department of Theatre, Drama and Contemporary Dance production of "The Foreigner." Mark Ulrich appears courtesy of Actors' Equity Association.

If you have laughter-induced asthma, take your inhaler when you see Indiana University Summer Theatre's "The Foreigner." Yes, that was I laughing and gasping Sunday evening, all through this hilarious, insightful and exquisitely cast play about how we view and treat The Other among us. And, maybe more important, how we view and treat ourselves when we are with The Other.

Although this production earns a 9.9, I will begin with the negatives, of which there are two:

It ended — two and a quarter hours can be long for many plays, but not for this one.

The playwright, Larry Shue, died young, truncating the list of what might have been more plays like this.

Highlights are missing, because every performer was so splendidly suited to his or her role, so no one stands out. I don't remember when I have witnessed that. Who chose this play? Who chose this cast? Thank you for one of the most joyous, funny, thought-provoking plays I have seen, ever.

"The Foreigner" is the perfect complement to IU's summer repertory season of three plays, the other two being the Americana drama "Our Town," and a peppy musical look at our obsessions with winning, "The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee."

And, remember, repertory usually means these actors switch roles — and plays — from night to night, a daunting task for both performers and crew.

Charlie (Mark Ulrich) is a sweet, good-to-the-bone proofreader who is also mortifyingly bashful. He always travels the high road, including tolerating his wife's 23, give or take, episodes of adultery. Seeking respite, he arrives at a country lodge in Georgia with his assertive and outgoing friend Froggy (Joshua M. Smith). What to do!? Charlie must make conversation with "strangers," other lodgers at the property, and he's particularly reticent because his wife's terminal illness has plummeted him into a funk.

Quick-thinking Froggy, however, devises an impromptu solution: He introduces Charlie to the others as a foreigner who cannot speak or understand English. Lucky Charlie can now vacation without the strain of interaction.

The lodge's widowed owner, Betty (Karen Woditsch), whose dream of seeing the world has been thwarted by having to hold down the lodge, thrills to the idea of meeting a real, live foreigner. "You done saved my life when you brought 'im here," she tells Froggy. "He's not a communist, is he?" she asks, just making sure. Delighting in her new foreign friend, she gushes, "We have this, this, this extra-circular communication!" Woditsch is precious.

Charlie, keen on being upstanding, refuses to go along with Froggy's deceptive scheme, but when he overhears a very personal conversation between Catherine (Glynnis Kunkel-Ruiz) and her fiance, the Rev. David Marshall Lee (Michael Bayler), he is trapped into following the foreigner plan. After all, to do so will save the honor of the young lovers.

Catherine's younger brother, Ellard (Max Weinberg), seems lacking in intelligence, which may cause him to lose out on his half of the \$10 million inheritance he deserves from his and Catherine's parents' recent demise. The reverend is eager to trick Catherine into seeing Ellard as too impaired to get his, Ellard's, half. I begin here to loathe the minister.

A good ole boy — and Ku Klux Klan member — Owen Musser (James Hogan) brings a deeply dark twist to the plot and kept me teetering on my seat's edge. Hogan is deliciously frightening.

Admittedly, I enjoy farce, physical humor, convoluted identities and other types of comedy, but even if I didn't, this play would have kept me laughing — and thinking.

Charlie, by default, becomes the ideal listener. At first, at least, he doesn't criticize, analyze or advise; he just blithely listens. And as he listens, he learns secrets and gains confidences and wins friends. He has power for the first time in his life, and oh so much wishes his wife "could see me now, Mary!"

Ulrich plays Charlie to perfection. We adore Charlie, because Ulrich is so intuitive. Woditsch's Betty is thoroughly lovable in many ways. Her facial expressions tell us exactly who this dear woman is, and her sense of comedy is the stuff casting directors pray for.

Kunkel-Ruiz hits it out of the park with this role, seemingly written for her. Creator Shue develops her character more than some of the others', and Kunkel-Ruiz is divine. For one thing, she is gorgeous in Linda Pisano's costumes; for another, she has this part down. Weinberg, who seemed nervous during his curtain speech, was — I hate to say it — perfect as little brother Ellard. I'll bet everyone in Sunday night's audience is in love with him now. Sweet, honest, genuine, helpful — that person we all want living next door.

Smith as Froggy is just right here, playing a wonderful straight man to Charlie's outlandishness. They are a team. Spoiler alert — I just despised that underhanded, apple-biting minister/fiance, played so beautifully by Bayler. And Bayler's deep voice added to the character's sordidness.

It's difficult to tell what parts of a play are the director's and what parts come from the performers themselves. And, of course, without a good, doable script, neither matters. But I imagine that since this production is so well-rounded, with every single actor getting a 10, that a lot of the credit goes to director Jonathan Michaelsen.

I don't know when I last thought I could see the same play every week, for a long time.

If you go

WHO: Indiana University Department of Theatre, Drama and Contemporary Dance.

WHAT: "The Foreigner" by Larry Shue.

WHERE: Wells-Metz Theater, 275 N. Jordan Ave., Bloomington.

WHEN: 7:30 p.m. July 12, 14, 18, 21, 26 & 29; 2 p.m. July 15, 22.

TICKETS: \$10-\$20. Visit theatre.indiana.edu or call 812-855-1103.



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