

Effort to emulate Shakespeare falls short

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REVIEW

On many levels, "Dear Brutus" is a logical show for Western State's Peak Productions to present this fall.

It arises from Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which was the last show Peak Productions staged in the spring, it utilizes an ensemble cast and gives several actors a chance to perform, and it's thought-provoking without being too dark or overly dramatic.

On other levels, however — most notably an excruciatingly slow second act — this play should be relegated to the past from whence it comes.

"Dear Brutus" comes across as a period piece in this production, directed by Paul Edwards, but it's an interesting period because it doesn't really exist.

The play was written by J.M. Barrie (of "Peter Pan" fame) not long after the turn of the century. The peculiar Native American set panels, designed by Ellen Seeling, come straight from the pages of Erté, an abstract designer whose work was featured prominently by ballet companies.

The costumes, also by Seeling, evoke Victorian dress but also feature Erté stylings and help place the whole show on the abstract plane Barrie apparently intended.

Very little about this production stands out. Performances

are generally subdued, and it seems as if the cast has forsaken projection in favor of getting their English accents right, so that the first act requires more work than the audience should have to do to figure out what's taking place.

A group of proper British citizens have been invited to the home of the mysterious Lob, an ageless Oriental who looks the same now as he did at least 70 years ago. The homage to Shakespeare and his midsummer night play begins early (and less than subtly) when one of the guests remarks that Lob is "what Puck might have become had he forgotten to die."

Puck is the impish fairy who creates chaos among the lives of Greek gentility and others in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and Lob, although hardly as volatile and dynamic as Puck, performs the same function in this play when he sends his guests into a mysterious wood that appears only during Midsummer Night and promises "a second chance."

Steve Powers is Lob, and most of his part consists of sleeping onstage, which Powers does admirably. In his waking moments he projects a sense of mystery that helps establish and maintain the dreamlike quality of the play.

His employee is the butler,

Jim Matey, played by Oscar Mackey. Mackey commands attention better than most of the rest of the cast, and his projection is good, even around a Cockney accent. What Mackey lacks early in the play, however, is the sense of ambitious opportunism and the slightly sinister aura Matey needs to help set the mood.

The guests include an odd triangle that gets turned inside out as the show progresses, and it features two good performances from some last-minute casting.

Ben McLeod and Mindy Peterson were both added to the cast as replacements about two weeks ago, but it's difficult to tell that they got a late start. McLeod is enthusiastic and dynamic and goes after his part, that of the philandering Jack Purdie, with verve.

Peterson is his put-upon wife Mabel, and the actress wears a martyred air that's almost palpable.

The point in the triangle is Joanna Trout, played by Heather Nicolson, who almost gets overpowered by the other two actors. Nicolson needs to present more, speak up and put some solid feeling behind her lines.

Will and Alice Dearth are people sharing living space but nothing of each other. Their dreams have crumbled, his career as an artist has been forsaken for drink, and she despires her husband.

August Mergelman is Will and Keni Tullio is Alice. Mergelman's performance is on a par with Nicolson's, his problems similar. Tullio gives a rather muted performance as well, although her lines can be heard.

Anna Kendall is imperious, but not nearly enough so, as Lady Caroline Laney, and Amy Wright shuffles through as the elderly Mrs. Coate without making her particularly noticeable.

Ethan Pearsons seems to have found a part that suits him as Mr. Coate, and he comes across well as an old, happy-go-lucky codger.

Tami Michele Comstock gives a viable, perky performance as Margaret, but it is her misfortune to appear in the scene that goes on interminably in the second act. Comstock's performance is not to be faulted, nor is Mergelman's — this blame lies squarely with the playwright, and possibly the director who didn't have enough sense to cut the author off when he rambled on in what could be construed as the playwright's reflection on his own life.

As it is, the tempo of the

entire production lags a bit, and the show — with a long scene change that could almost be a short intermission and the actual intermission between the second and third acts — runs about 20 minutes too long.

The lighting design, by John Barnes, tries for some directional light that comes 180 degrees from the wrong direction, and isn't quite moody enough to set the surreal scenes.

Playwright Barrie does himself a disfavor by repeatedly offering up comparisons to Shakespeare, who has survived through the centuries, while this play may not even last for 100 years. Even the title is borrowed from "Julius Caesar": "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves," a lesson Barrie presents and then repeats too often in the final scene — in case somehow the point was missed.

"Dear Brutus" opens tonight and runs through Saturday in the Taylor Hall auditorium on the WSC campus. Curtain is at 8 p.m. Tickets are available in advance for \$4 (\$2 for students) from the Circus Train, Paper Clip, the Gunnison Arts Center and the WSC Bookstore.