

"Leaving Home" a dynamite drama



(photo by Errol Young)

In this scene from Neptune Theatre's production of David French's LEAVING HOME, Jacob (Gerard Parkes), in a desperate last attempt to keep the family together, tries to convince his son Ben (Asheleigh Moorhouse) not to move out. LEAVING HOME is on stage at Neptune until March 24th.

by Glenn Wanamaker

It is the mid-fifties in Toronto, a city which has not yet outlived its "goodness." The Mercer family is from Newfoundland, though the two teenage boys have a little bit of Toronto in them. The youngest, Billy (Richard Kelley), is seventeen and will be married the next day. The oldest, Ben (Asheleigh Moorhouse) is nineteen and is about to enter university.

Jacob, the father (Gerard Parkes), is tough and weathered and won't take anything for an answer. His wife, Mary (Florence Paterson), will take anything for an answer, if it will keep the peace.

Billy's bride-to-be, Kathy Jackson (Mary Long), is pregnant, and it is only for this reason that they are getting married. Billy says he's not ready, so Ben decides to move in with them.

This is "Leaving Home", by Canadian playwright David French, now on stage at Neptune Theatre.

The plot is fairly simple, though provocative enough to provide a realistic insight into the general family affairs with one eventful day. The relationship between Ben and his father Jacob is certainly the most volatile, however it is only symptomatic of the overall family relationship.

Only once during the play was the relationship examined critically and not superficially. Previously it seemed that the Mercer family existed from battle to battle, with only short truces to take a rest. Jacob and Ben were continually at each other's throats, with relatively minor pitched battles between them and the other members of the family.

Jacob is often irrational in his outbursts and for this reason, the family tells him as little as possible. When Jacob finds out from Minnie Jackson, Kathy's mother, that Ben wants to leave home, he is infuriated because he was not told. He tears up Ben's high school diploma, a

source of pride to the whole family, and when he leaves the room for a moment, Ben falls into a short philosophizing.

He blames himself and the others for never treating him as a member of the family, for hiding things from him, and for prejudging his reactions. He says they have never tried to understand him, just avoid him. He regrets that they have never confided in him.

The family has already broken up, if not physically then morally and spiritually. Everyone knows it, but Ben and his father have to have one more dramatic battle to make the parting consistent and final.

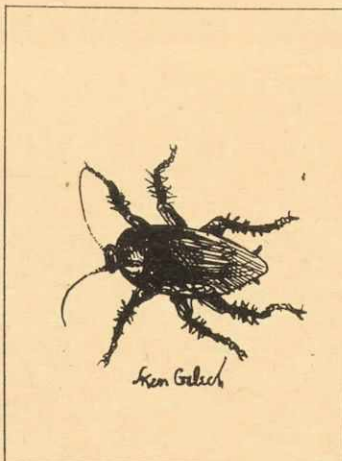
The wedding is all but forgotten, except when Jacob finds it convenient to compare Billy's "manhood" to Ben's "nothingness." Kathy's miscarriage also tends to be overshadowed, except when the final conflicts finally push Billy into wanting to leave home and get married.

The family interaction is the key to the play. The particularly outstanding performance of Gerard Parkes as Jacob, visibly exhausted at the end, was essential to the flow of the play. It was carried off superbly; intensely realistic and personal. Mary was somewhat weaker though this is in part due to her role of trying to act as a buffer (and rarely succeeding). In quick succession, she is alternately smiling and arguing and this seemed slightly overplayed even with her casting.

Both Billy and Ben were consistently natural. One gets the impression that they were close friends, even though Ben is less-favoured by his father. Kathy Jackson is sufficiently quiet and unsure of herself and her relationship with Billy. She too played her part most convincingly, most commendable for her professional stage debut. All these characters do nothing but add to the realism of the play.

The other two characters, Minnie Jackson (Liza Creighton) and her 'friend' Harold (Robert D. Reid), are strong supporting performers. Minnie is all physical, her personality literally flowing out of her styleless blue dress. Harold, an embalmer, is solid and adds a little bit of levity to the whole situation.

"Leaving Home" is short, but is direct and at times, amusing. The Newfoundland accents and expressions add perfectly to the situation, again bringing in a little humour. A good, natural Canadian play, "Leaving Home" moves smoothly with plenty of action. It's on stage at Neptune until March 24.



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