

Walterdale opener lacks sense of fun

The Hand That Cradles The Rock
Walterdale Theatre
Through October 14

review by Trevor Buckle

The Walterdale Theatre has started off its new season in a rather disappointing manner with its production of Warren Graves' comedy, *The Hand That Cradles The Rock*. Although this play, under the direction of James Vosper, is not a failure and actually has some very funny moments, its potential is never fully realized. Part of the problem is that the pace is too slow and often the actors' timing is off, both of which can be forgiven considering the Walterdale is an amateur theatre. However, the key ingredient in any comedy is a sense of fun, which in this case is not present.

Essentially, this play deals with the problems in the marriage of Ross and Alexandra Cameron. Alex is a rising star in the interior design world and is forever off working on different projects all over the country. This leaves Ross at home tending the baby, cleaning the house, and trying to get his latest book published. Of course, when they do get together, their schedules conflict, so they are always feeling unsatisfied. When a

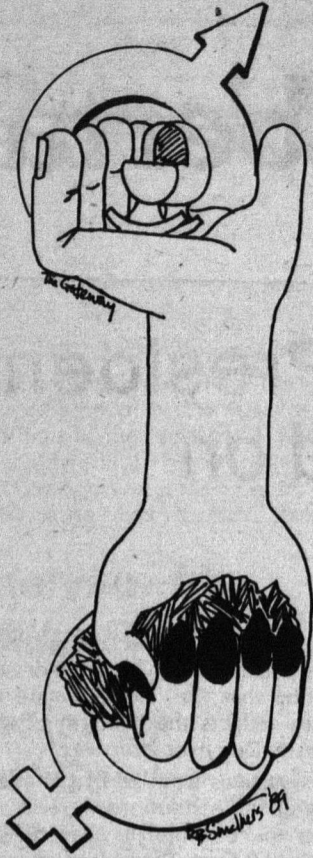
nubile young nurse, who is also an amateur writer, enters their lives and declares an 'artistic affinity' for Ross, sparks begin to fly. The script, although far from cerebral or thought-provoking, is full of very witty and funny one-liners, much in the style of Noel Coward.

So why does this play not succeed on all fronts? As I said, the pace of the play and the timing of the actors are mostly wrong. A comedy/farce like this should snap along at a quick pace, zinging the witticisms at the audience. Instead, it seems to drag along, with the actors appearing unsure of themselves as they say their lines. Thus, lines that should have us rolling in the aisles fall flat instead. Of course, there are exceptions to this. The two dream sequences really are funny, and the cast seems to enjoy themselves, pushing their parts to their campy limits. Also, when Ross and Carolyn are thrown together alone in the cabin, there is a real tension created. These scenes work, and it's a shame that Vosper did not carry this enthusiasm into the rest of the play.

The acting itself varies. Art Van Loo as Ross really works hard at trying to get the laughs. He is expressive and visually interesting to watch. His only fault is obvious when the

expected laughs do not arrive, so he appears to push his characterization more and more in an attempt to get them. The result comes across as being overly-exaggerated more than anything else. Karen Hansen as Alex starts out somewhat stiffly but eventually gets into her character by the start of Act Two. Carol Stanley as Beattie, Alex's mother, has a few good moments but is essentially stiff as well. This is really a shame because this particular character has some of the best lines in the play, and, if played with relish, could be really delightful. As George, Beattie's companion, Jim Shepard shows a real understanding of his character, and his entrance on stage always produces a smile. Eva Marie Clarke, as Carolyn, is also good. She plays her character with a prissy outer shell, while inside she is a smoldering romantic.

The set and stage effects are interesting. A lot of work obviously went into the creation of the set and it really is stylish. One can believe that Alex's decorating talents are in demand (early in the play, we are told that Alex has redecorated the place). It is functional and looks great. The play does not call



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for fancy work with lighting or sound effects except in the dream sequences. At this point, the lights go low and out pops a mirrored ball from the ceiling to reflect little beams of light everywhere. At the same time, gushy romantic music is blasted in to create the mood. The effect is marvellous.

The costumes are also good. Since this is a contemporary play, no one probably had to go to great lengths to create anything, and what is worn suits the characters. Again, the only exceptions are in the dream sequences when Alex's hunting outfit falls apart, revealing a slinky negligee. The same can be said for Carolyn's nineteenth century dress. It is a hilarious nightmare made of purple satin and black lace. Ross and George also look great in satin dressing gowns, doing their best Hugh Hefner imitations.

The Hand That Cradles The Rock is not a bad production. I have tried to focus on its merits and its faults. However, I cannot really recommend it. I think the most telling aspect of the production came when the actors gave us their final bows. None of them were smiling, and, in fact, appeared vaguely dissatisfied. I think the audience felt the same way.

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