

Prairie Report: A slick performance

Prairie Report
Workshop West at the Kaasa
through October 30

review by Elaine Ostry

Editorial meetings are usually the scene of confrontation, especially for those working for the *Prairie Report*. After all, none of these young journalists quite fit the ultra-conservative mold of the magazine they work for (which bears more than a striking resemblance to the *Alberta Report*.)

Frank Moher dissects the Modern Journalist with great skill in *Prairie Report*, the season opener for Workshop West. He exposes their cowardice, hypocrisy, self-righteousness and moral blindness, but in an understanding, compassionate way. Moher subtly shows relations between co-workers and how people deal with personal beliefs which oppose those of their boss.

The high quality of Moher's script is matched by a slick performance. The actors work well together, and each actor develops his character fully. The direction is skillful and the pace matches the needs of the play perfectly. Nothing seems out of step.

The conflict that most of the journalists feel between personal and professional views is thrown into relief when the magazine is taken over by one Bill Coolen, who is even more conservative than the former owner (and Easterner to boot.)

The first act is fast-paced, and addresses the questions: Whether the magazine is being bought out, and if so, by whom? The second act is slower and more thoughtful,

as the effects of the takeover are felt. Both acts are *funny*, and this humour grows blacker as the play progresses.

Susan Sneath leads the cast with her performance as Pauline Brett. Pauline favours regionalism but is not a conservative, which makes her a minority. She has a fierce conviction in her beliefs, and kicks herself for having kept them apart from her work for so long. It is she who forces the others to recognize their hypocrisies as well.

Maria Semchuk is the other female editor. She is conservative in every aspect except her sexuality. When Coolen finds out she is a lesbian, Semchuk is rudely fired. Jacqueline Dandenau performs this role with intelligent sensitivity.

Tony Eyamie plays Stuart McFadden, whose great dream is to work for *MacLean's*. "I'll bet the *Globe and Mail* doesn't have cookies at their editorial meetings," he sniffs. "So unhip." He is a lovable fool, and you know he'll be working at the *Prairie Report* for the rest of his days. He is actually a New Democrat, but drops his support like a hot coal when Colleen comes along.

David Mann gives a fine performance as the crusty old publisher/owner beaten out by the slick new generation of conservatives. Dick Bennington deplores this new breed, which is more extreme in its views than he is.

Bennington longs for the days "when conservatives had ideas, not agendas," when you could argue with the CCF "and still go out for a beer with them after." His arch enemy, William Coolen, is played with a smooth cool sneer by Steven Hilton. Bennington has to agree with Pauline



Otis Bennington (Michael Spencer-Davis) and Kael (Wendell Smith) in Frank Moher's *Prairie Report*.

when she says "We made — him — possible." Extremism only leads to further extremism.

By the end of the play, several changes have been made in the editorial staff, but no one really changes on the *inside*. Most of them cling to the view that a job's a job, and writing the beliefs of the owner is part of the deal. This is good; wholesale conversions would have diminished the effect of the play.

Moher's dialogue is the icing on the cake. "We do *not* make fun of farmers,"

says Bennington sternly; later he defends the Imperial system of measurement with great eloquence. When Pauline expresses fears that the magazine will be taken over by neo-Fascist interests, Simon caustically replies: "We *already* work for a neo-Fascist magazine."

Prairie Report is a witty exposure of politics in the workplace. Moher resists the easy route of simply attacking the right wing, instead showing that no character and no view is spotless. Workshop West does this illuminating play justice.

Clara is too nice for words

Clara's Heart ★ ★
Famous Players Gateway, Westmount

review by Alexandra Parr

This is a really nice movie; nice in a negative sense because it doesn't accomplish anything — it just smooths everything over into a saleable, but boring package. *Clara's Heart* is not a movie anyone could hate, but I am hard pressed to describe the plot; whatever the writers and directors had in mind when they installed a sensible Jamaican housekeeper, Clara (Whoopi Goldberg), into a wealthy but very screwed-up Baltimore family home, is still a mystery to me.

The story ostensibly concerns the relationship between David, an obnoxious rich kid, and Clara, who has been hired by David's mother, Leona Hart (Kathleen Quinlan), while she is recuperating at a spa in Jamaica. The Hart family needs serious help: their infant daughter has just died, and the remainder of the family seems to have completely lost any bonds with each other. Indeed, David's parents the process of breaking up, and one wonders if they even knew each other before the drama begins, they seem so completely alien to one another. By the same token, the parents don't seem even remotely related to David, and their infrequent

"parental" actions are all wrong and out of place.

Enter Clara, who gradually wins over David's confidence and friendship, giving him something he badly needs, especially considering that his mother is now seeing her therapist and his father is living downtown with his decorator. Whoopi Goldberg gives a compelling performance as Clara, and some of the scenes involving Clara and David are funny and touching. However, in the end, I'm not exactly sure what Clara did for David or for the Hart family. She was there, and she made good breakfasts and removed David from a few ugly scenes, but the plot is not developed fully enough for the audience to understand what really bonds David to her.

There are chances for the story to go somewhere. David's persistent attempts to make the school swim team, for example, suggest his desire to be closer to his father — but that is never followed up. Another possibility is Clara's family secret, which is a source of mystery to both David and the audience, but when it is revealed, it doesn't help us understand Clara at all. This is unfortunate, because Whoopi Goldberg and the young Neil Patrick Hanks, who plays David, do some excellent acting; had they a better story to work with, the movie would have been far more interesting.

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