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THEA 101-02

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*Dead Man’s Cell Phone* Paper

 To kick off the 2015-2016 season, Longwood put on a production of Sarah Ruhl’s *Dead Man’s Cell Phone*. This modern play is billed as a dark comedy that reflects on “the need to connect in a technologically obsessed world.” I would classify the play as a dark dramedy, as some scenes are meant to be humorous, while others are intended to be dramatic. Personally, I did not like this play. While Longwood did a good job with the production, the concept and script of the play itself were not to my liking. This supposed “wildly imaginative dark comedy” was slightly entertaining, though often morbid, in its first act, had a few highlights in the first half of the second act, and became a confusing and depressing mess in the last scenes of the play. However, while I did not enjoy the play, I commend the actors for doing a good job with the material they were given.

 One actor that really surprised me was Miriam Loya, who played Gordon’s widow, Hermia. In her first scene at the dinner with Jean, Dwight, and Mrs. Gottlieb, she came across rather emotionless and flat, though she did a good job dealing with a coughing fit she got during the scene. However, in her drunk scene in the second act, she really shined and was dynamic, emotional, and believable. In this scene, Hermia is attempting to negotiate the loss of her husband by talking to Jean about what her life was like with him. Jean is a little taken aback by the risqué nature of Hermia’s account, though the alcohol probably made her more forthcoming than usual. To accomplish Hermia’s objective in this scene, Loya had to build an onstage chemistry with Baylee Hollloran, who played Jean, through conversation, interaction, and reaction. Loya had excellent movement and slow, loud quality of speech that really showed the inebriated state of her character while displaying a changing undertone of emotions about the loss of her husband. Loya had good volume and articulation, as did the rest of the cast, and there was no point during which I couldn’t understand what was being said. She even managed to speak clearly while having a coughing fit during the first act. Overall, Miriam Loya’s performance was mediocre in the first act, but she certainly surprised me in the second act with a great performance.

The play was fairly well cast. At some point during the play, all of the actors had a chance to shine, though some had some moments in which they weren’t as believable or emotional. I especially want to applaud Jimmy Mello for his dynamic performance as Gordon. The actors seemed to play off of each other well and there was some good onstage chemistry, particularly the back-and-forth between Baylee Holloran (Jean) and Jimmy Mello (Gordon) in the latter half of the second act in which the two characters are in the “afterlife” discussing its nature and Jean’s mixed emotions towards Gordon. There were some parts of the play in which the acting style was presentational, such as the church service scene, the first scene of Act 2, and the scene in which Jean is in the “afterlife.” In these scenes Mrs. Gottlieb, Gordon, and Jean respectively talked directly to the audience. The pacing was good in the first act, but in the second act the pace sped up a little too much, which may have contributed to some of the confusion I felt while watching it. The blocking was reasonably interesting; though a lot of the scenes involved characters just sitting around and talking. The blocking of the “chase” sequence between Jean and Gordon’s mistress was well done, and had a kind of campy spy vibe that was entertaining.

 At the end of a play, the story should wrap up nicely in a way that reiterates and solidifies the plays theme or themes. In the last scene of the play, Jean tells Mrs. Gottlieb that Gordon is waiting for her in the afterlife. In a moment of irrational, overwhelming need to reunite with her son, Mrs. Gottlieb commits suicide in the fireplace to join Gordon in the afterlife. While this scene does continue a theme of the characters’ irrational need for connection, for example, how Jean tells absurd lies about being Gordon’s coworker just to connect with his family, Mrs. Gottlieb’s demise does not relate back to the larger theme of the work, namely, how technology both separates and connects people in the modern world. While this message was an underlying theme talked about by several characters throughout the play, to me it often seemed forced in and not always connected to the scene or natural for the characters. The more important and natural parts of the story centered around Jean’s desperation to find meaning and connection in her life and how her opinions of Gordon shifted throughout the play, as she learned more of what he was like in life, illustrating how society tends to see the deceased as perfect, and memorialize them as such regardless of how many faults they may have had in life. Overall, the script vacillated between themes and tones, and ended up being confusing without a clear plot or intention. While Longwood may have done well with the production, I think a different play would have been a better choice and would probably have appealed to a larger audience.