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Translating the Good and the Bad

Longwood University Theatre Department’s production of *Translations* was overall a satisfactory production. One fear I had going into the play was my ability to suspend my disbelief. As a peer of the actors, would I be able to fully ignore the fact that I saw Lieutenant Yolland in D-hall yesterday? Fortunately, I was able to acknowledge who they really were, then put them into character for the rest of the performance. One major critique I had was the setting. Not the stage design itself, I thought that was well constructed. However, the setup of the room, I felt like impaired the viewing. If an actor faced the right side of the stage, only the audience on the right saw the facial expressions and gestures of the actor. For example, Jimmy began expressing his desire for companionship and eventually stood on the stage right corner. In doing so, he had his back turned to the front audience (where I was) and made a “shh” gesture with his finger over his mouth. I could barely see this action and while this did not deprive me of the plot, and may not have deprived anyone else, these gestures are important to the characterization of the actors. A simple solution to this is a formal auditorium setting. Typically in that setting, actors are not given the option to turn their back on the audience.

In my opinion, most of the characters were cast well, understanding the limited options in such a small company. Some actors truly fit their character better than others. For example, Erica Johnson, who played Sarah, has a demeanor from the physical characteristics on her face that allowed her to play the timid, childlike look of Sarah. The expression of her eyebrows being dramaticized for this part allowed her to reach a depth of the character that few could achieve. Other actors also had this distinct physical characteristic that allowed them to characterize themselves into the part. Another example of this is how Matt Carley’s size made him more presentable as the master. However, some actors did not have this ease to carry them into their character. Brianna Lafratta, for example, brought a lot of distractions within her character, Bridget. As soon as she started talking, she had a broken, choppy accent. While this transition is a hard one to make, the constant swap from her American dialect to a subtle Irish accent turned out to be a major flaw. If the actor cannot perform the accent well, then he or she should not try, because the mix of the native and new accents is just as unacceptable as a bad one. Overall, I was able to follow each actor and their role in the play with minimal trouble. Any other trouble I had I would credit to the script, mostly in reference to who was who. At times, it would take several minutes before a name was given on stage to a newly introduced character.

If I had to choose a favorite actor, I would choose either Maire or Lieutenant Yolland. To focus on one, Maire did not struggle in her accent, nor did she break her character in any way. It was clear that she was paying attention to her next cue, but while waiting for her parts, she remained in character. For example, there were several scenes where Maire was in distress. At one point she walked toward the front of the stage to her left and looked into the distance while the rest of the scene proceeded. Maire obviously had a cue to come back, but instead of having a choppy exit and entrance, she held her face and poise in a despairing manner. In holding her character’s emotion, Mary Jo Corley brought the play to a more realistic, natural state. Corley also has the physical characteristics, that I previously mentioned, to allow her easy access to Maire to characterize herself. Corley fit the role of Maire, a graceful, beautiful young lady who would eventually fall in love, perfectly. Her majestic means of carrying herself truly aided her in how she portrayed Maire.

While I strongly disagree with the seating of the audience and have a simple dislike for the storyline of the play, I think the theatre department at Longwood excelled given the circumstances. Even though these actors are young and in training, I think most of them did an excellent job at characterizing themselves. As an unqualified critic, I would not have known these actors were “in training,” as that can lend a negative connotation to the professionalism I saw in the actors.

P.S. Hugh was standing on the stairwell at the back of the stage for his final speech.