

Subtle but affecting Fine acting makes 'Stones' a delight

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"Stones in His Pockets"

1/2 out of four

Location: McAninch Arts Center, College of DuPage, 425 Fawell Blvd., Glen Ellyn

Times: 8 p.m. Thursdays to Saturdays, 2 p.m. Sundays; through May 25

Running Time: About two hours, with intermission

Tickets: \$20, \$22

Parking: Free lot adjacent to theater

Box office: (630) 942-4000 or atthemac.org

Rating: For adults, contains strong language

The words "physical theater" conjure images of acrobatic and athletic displays produced by Lookingglass Theatre, The Actors Gymnasium and 500 Clown, companies where actors routinely tumble and soar.

Not all theater requires such spectacle, but all acting embodies a kinetic component even if it's just the blink of an eye or a quirk of the lips. And while it may be less boisterous, the more subtle physical expression is no less beguiling.

Case in point, the laudable performances by Henry Michael Odum and William "Sandy" Smillie, who scrupulously invoke more than a dozen characters in Buffalo Theatre Ensemble's thoroughly delightful "Stones in His Pockets."

Fluid describes director Bryan Burke's well-conceived production, which follows last fall's "The Woman in Black" as BTE's second two-actor, tour-de-force of the season. It's an example of masterful acting and pristine physical characterizations by Odum and Smillie, who spin on their heels to morph seamlessly between characters, evoking them with a hitched shoulder, a tucked-in chin and a lilting Southern-accented voice and a pair of fluttering hands.

Irish playwright Marie Jones' amiable comedy centers on down-on- their-luck Irishmen Charlie Conlon (Odum) and Jake Quinn (Smillie), extras on a Hollywood epic filming in their County Kerry town.

Played with genial optimism by Odum, Charlie is a not-quite- defeated 42-year-old video store owner and would-be screenwriter. Having been dumped by his girlfriend and driven out of business by a video chain, he goes to work on the film (one of the viable industries remaining in the country) with the other locals secretly dreaming of a Hollywood happily ever after.

A happy ending also eludes the more cynical Jake, who has recently returned from the United States to no job and few prospects. Smillie plays the role with a barely contained bitterness and growing frustration that makes for a nicely shaded performance.

A sendup of big-budget filmmaking, the story centers on Charlie and Jake's encounter with big-budget filmmaking. But the well-told tale involves plenty of other characters (all played by Odum and Smillie), which set designer Michael W. Moon evokes with the tidy array of shoes aligned along a low brick wall. There's the superficially kind but self-involved Caroline Giovanni, the American star who can't manage an Irish accent; short-tempered A.D. Simon; long-suffering script girl Ashley, who tolerates a little slap-and-tickle to advance her career; and the patronizing British director Clem, disappointed that the cows don't look more Irish. The locals include stooped and sawy veteran Mickey, one of the last surviving extras from "The Quiet Man"; the easily led and eternally loyal Finn; and the dispossessed Sean, Jake's drug addict cousin.

For all its gentle humor, there's a tragic core to this play. Rooted in the economic hardship that preceded Ireland's 1990s boom, it serves as a poignant example of despair fueled by privation and disappointment, of people used as background color by an industry that seduces them with dreams of stardom few of them will realize.

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