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Sunset's stories vividly etch 3 characters

Fine acting marks monologues of 'Three Viewings'

By DAMIEN JAQUES
Journal Sentinel theater critic

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Regardless of whether a production is pageant or pint sized, good theater is about storytelling. Sit down and allow someone to tell you a tale.

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In Jeffrey Hatcher's satisfying theater piece "Three Viewings," we get a trio of intriguing stories loosely related by their location, a small-town Pennsylvania funeral home. Despite the glum setting, the 95-minute show is poignant rather than sad as it displays the Minnesota playwright's deft and knowing touch.

Kopper Bear Productions recently opened a pleasing production of "Three Viewings" in the Sunset Playhouse's Studio Theatre in Elm Grove.

Each "viewing," or story, is a monologue delivered to the audience in segments separated by brief blackouts. It's a tough assignment for actors, and the Kopper Bear cast, directed by Howard Bashinski, meets the challenge.

Brian Faracy begins the action, introducing us to the funeral home's middle-aged proprietor, Emil. Faracy is the picture of small-town undertaker rectitude, but Emil has a secret obsession, and the actor makes that crackle with a low-grade sizzle.

The buttoned-down mortician has a raging crush on a local real estate saleswoman, but he can't find the nerve to tell her. Emil finds a clever way to give her a competitive advantage in her business and, as in all of these stories, critical details are gradually revealed without fanfare.

Next comes Amy Geyser playing Mac, a rootless woman called home from California to attend her wealthy grandmother's funeral. Mac is quite comfortable at wakes. Stealing jewelry from strangers' corpses in open caskets helps her pay the bills.

This is clearly a brash and bold woman, callous to the grief and mystery surrounding death. But our opinion of Mac shifts as her experience with mortality is divulged.

Director Bashinski cast against type when he chose Geyser for the brassy role. She ably portrays Mac's brazen hardness and very effectively softens when the story calls for it.

Virginia, a new widow, delivers the final monologue. She knew nothing about her late husband's dicey financial dealings and suddenly discovers she is a potentially homeless pauper. The story has a warm plot twist that would make O. Henry proud.

Elaine Wyler embodies Virginia with a superb aura of false chatty cheer, a cover for her attempt to hold grief and fear in check. It's an outstanding performance.

If You Go

"Three Viewings" continues through Feb. 17 at the Sunset Playhouse, 800 N. Elm Grove Road, Elm Grove. For tickets call (262) 782-4430 or visit www.sunsetplayhouse.com.

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