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Leaving Iowa

At the **Fox Valley Repertory**

By Dan Zeff

St. Charles—Co-authors Tim Clue and Spike Manton were in the opening night audience of the Fox Valley Repertory (formerly Noble Fool Theatrical) production of "Leaving Iowa." The dramatists were likely expecting a conventional rendering of their humorous and touching tale about parents and children in America's heartland. What they saw was a prickly, if often comic, portrait of a dysfunctional family.

Since its first performance in 2004, "Leaving Iowa" has been a popular play among regional theaters, winning much praise as a warm and nostalgic trip into middle America. The action moves back and forth in time between today and perhaps 25 years ago in the lives of the Browning family of Winterset, Iowa. There is the father and the mother and offspring Dan, the narrator, and his younger sister. Much of the play follows the foursome as they take a family automobile vacation that turns into a continuous calamity.

The vacation trip is framed by the now adult Dan visiting his Iowa home from Boston, where he is a successful journalist. Don and his father had an uneasy relationship right up to the old man's death three years previously. Dan decides to take his own automobile voyage of discovery to find a place to deposit the urn containing his father's ashes. His solo journey turns out to inflict as many miseries on him as the old family jaunts.

Lifeline Theatre
 Light Opera Works
 Light Opera-2nd stage
 Lookingglass Theatre
 Marriott Theater
 Mercury Theater
 Next Theatre
 Noble Fool Theatricals
 Northlight Theatre
 Pegasus Players
 Piven Theatre Workshop
 Porchlight Musical
 Profiles Theatre
 Raven Theatre
 Redmoon Theatre
 Remy Bumpo Theatre
 Rosemont Theatre
 Route 66 Theatre Co,
 Royal George Theatre
 Royal George Cabarat
 Second City(Mainstage)
 Second City E.T.C.
 SecondCityTheatricals
 Signal Ensemble
 ShatteredGlobeTheatre
 Stephenwolf(Upstairs)
 Steppenwolf
 Strawdog Theatre
 Theatre at the Center
 Theater Wit
 Theo Ubique Cabaret
 TimeLine Theatre Co
 Victory Gardens
 Victory Gardens Studio
 Writers' Theatre



"Leaving Iowa" is intended to be warm and nostalgic, a return to the days when an entire family would pile into a car and drive to some nearby attraction. This was a world untouched by Disney World and family cruises to the Mexican Riviera. But the Fox Repertory revival portrays the Browning family as a disagreeable lot. We can cut some slack for Dan (Alex Goodrich) and his kid sister (Katherine Banks). They are youngsters and expected to fight and whine. As the adult Dan, Goodrich has a whiff of Jimmy Stewart about him, which fits the everyman character nicely.

But Don Forston's father is a loud and stubborn man, a sort of ineffectual bully. He should be endearing but he's mostly abrasive. Diane Dorsey's mother seems emotionally disconnected from the rest of her family, criticizing and complaining and dithering. Those two performances set the combative tone that rests uneasily with the touchy feely intentions of the co-authors.

This isn't to say that the production lacks comedy. The incessant confrontations within the family, both on the vacation and in the modern scenes, are filled with humorous possibilities. But the laughs have an edge to them, often scored off the sister's brattiness and the father's bluster. A lot of the humor comes from a bizarre assortment of characters the family meets then and now, all performed with impressive comic versatility by Sean Patrick Fawcett and Valerie Glowinski.

The production is directed by Rachel Rockwell, one of the area's best directors. Presumably Rockwell obtained the results she sought in making the Brownings such a quarrelsome family. Possible I'm overreacting to the belligerent clashes among spouses and siblings, but I saw a production of "Leaving Texas" at the Royal George Theatre in 2007 that captured the human family ties built into the script. For many viewers, the Fox Valley Repertory will work very nicely. I just remember it as being a much different and much more ingratiating play. I missed the love.

Writer's (Book store)

The Play's the Thing



If there is a hero in this staging, it's Mike Tutaj for his witty and creative video design. Come to the theater early and be entertained by all the Iowa lore projected on a screen at the rear of the stage. Kevin Depinet is the scenic designer. In particular, Depinet cleverly evokes the family auto with a set of crates assembled on stage by the characters. Elizabeth Flauto designed the costumes, and Miles Polaski the sound.

"Leaving Iowa" runs through March 13 at the Fox Valley Repertory at the Pheasant Run Resort, 4051 East Main Street. Most performances are Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. Tickets are \$29 and \$39, with dinner packages available. The resort has three main eating venues, the Harvest, Jambalaya, and the Atrium buffet. On Friday and Saturday evenings the Atrium offers a Chef's Table, with a salad and soup bar and a dessert buffet along with a selection of one of four entries and prepared in full view of the customer. The Chef's Table strikes a nice balance between the high end Harvest and the casual Jambalaya, all for one reasonable price. Nice atmosphere, superior service, and just a short walk to the theater. For tickets call 630 584 6342 or visit www.ticketmaster.com.

"Leaving Iowa" gets a rating of three stars. January 2011

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