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MOVIES

Review: "The Night Heron"

*** RATING / Bizarre circumstances are made believable by solid performances

By Bob Bcws

Special to The Denver Post

POSTED: 10/21/2007 01:00:00 AM

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Images from Paragon Theatre's "The Night Heron."

In the most desperate of circumstances, friendship and humor are our greatest allies, for they give us hope.

This optimistic take-away is not self-evident in the regional premiere of Jez Butterworth's "The Night Heron," which opens the season for Paragon Theatre. But that is what remains after this unique foray into East Anglian magical realism has percolated through our subconscious.

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Bizarre as the circumstances are, it all seems real enough as we watch Wattmore, an unemployed gardener, alone in his ramshackle cabin in the marshlands of Cambridgeshire, England. He recites what he apparently believes is his last will and testament, an essay on mulches, into a portable radio/cassette player-recorder, before he limps away to get his shotgun to end it all.

A knock on the door sends this sword of Damocles into the background. The ensuing whirlwind of strange, dark events and the inscrutability of Warren Sherrill's Wattmore, a burly man of few words and unexpressed emotions, quickly grab and keep our attention. Terra firma abandons us with the alternately nervous, kind, numb and dark ruminations of Sherrill's portrayal.

Wattmore's best friend and roommate, Griffin, also an unemployed gardener, returns with painkillers for Wattmore's mysterious injuries. Michael Stricker does wonders with the talkative Griffin, who, given his friend's laconic manner, is the principal narrative vehicle. Stricker punctuates Butterworth's well-honed dialogue with such natural rhythms that it sings, serving up some great stories in the process.



Together, Sherrill and Stricker give unspoken depth to Wattmore and Griffin's friendship, which is tested by the unanticipated arrival of Bolla, a quirky new roommate right out of the women's penitentiary.

There are some actors born to play the rare bird, and Mare Trevathan is one: After years of incarceration and untold abuse, her hypersensitive, eerie Bolla makes our skin crawl.

Coincidentally, the sighting of a rare night heron has brought birdwatchers to the marsh, exacerbating the townfolk's dither over some

serious accusations directed toward Wattmore. Now Bolla adds to their uneasiness. Is she that rumored bird, or simply a manifestation of Wattmore's shadow? Is she evil, as Wattmore and Griffin's former co-worker charges, or is she a force for change - perhaps Wattmore's conscience?

Butterworth conjures ominous external forces as well, with the locals putting pressure on Wattmore to be forthcoming with his side of the incident in question. Here, the press, the law and the church are cleverly veiled in the guises of the idiosyncratic Neddy (Jim Hunt), Royce (Jarrad Holbrook) and Dougal (Josh Hartwell), each edgy in his own way.

Director Wendy Franz orchestrates a rich palette of silence and storytelling, foreboding lighting and sound effects, consistent dialect work, and as genuine a rustic setting as you'll ever see.

In a Jungian twist that separates Butterworth's characters from the likes of the unredeemed anti-heroes of Pinter, McDonagh and Tarantino, the final scenes provide a transformational interplay that delivers as promised, though it feels more a symbolic catharsis than an emotional one.

"THE NIGHT HERON"

Presented by Paragon Theatre Company at the Phoenix Theatre, 1124 Santa Fe Drive. Written by Jez Butterworth. Directed by Wendy Franz. Starring Warren Sherrill, Michael Stricker, and Mare Trevathan. 2 hours. 7:30 p.m. Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, through Nov. 10. \$17-19. 303-300-2210 or paragontheatre.org (<http://paragontheatre.org>)

Bob Bows also reviews theater for Variety, for KUVO/89.3 FM, and for his own website, coloradodrama.com (<http://coloradodrama.com>). He can be reached at bbows@coloradodrama.com (<mailto:bbows@coloradodrama.com>).

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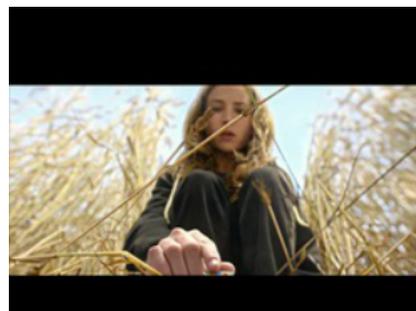
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