



Wednesday, December 2, 2009

Whiskey Ways

San Jose Stage Company looks at the ways men use alcohol to hide their pain in *The Seafarer*

By Jessica Fromm

THE SEAFARER may be a modern-day Faustian fable, but alcohol and its abuse is the real central character of this whiskey-soaked Irish tale. Written by Conor McPherson, one of the top contemporary playwrights in his native Ireland, the play explores both the kinship and the crushing misery of alcoholism through a fateful Yuletide visit from the devil himself. The second production of the San Jose Stage Company's 2009–10 season, *The Seafarer* centers on two middle-aged, working-class alky brothers living together in a filthy flat.

The younger and more timid James "Sharky" Harkin (played by Stage co-founder and artistic director Randall King) is shakily trying to remain off the bottle for the holidays. On the other hand, his blind brother Richard's (an excellent Julian López-Morillas) sole aim in life is to get increasingly violently tanked with his buddy Ivan Curry (Colin Thomson) and to fill the Christmas Eve emptiness with a game of poker. But the stakes get raised when their moocher friend Nicky Giblin (Donald G. Emmerich) stops by with a mysterious friend in tow.

Considering that the themes of this holiday tale are based in McPherson's own feelings as a recovering alcoholic, the angst and desperation of Sharky's tentative sobriety and his kinsmen's raging drunkenness grate on and sting the audience, as they should. King's pathetic Sharky is sensitive, like an open wound wincing at every one of his brother's demands but soldiering on, head hung low. Every other line, the sloppy Richard is pushing another drink or opening up another bottle, he and the other characters becoming increasingly infantile in their inebriation as the night wears on. When Mr. Lockhart, the business-suit-clad stranger, enters, the cards come out. But he's there for something much more eternal than a few Euros. Lockhart reveals himself to Sharky as none other than Satan himself, there to make a bet for his soul for past misdeeds.

It's a simple plot, but one that has been part of European lore for ages, and it still makes for good theater. Played by San Jose Stage Company regular Kevin

Blackton, Lockhart frequently sidles up to the stove on the right side of the stage for warmth, the fire's red light cast up onto his face for a dramatically evil effect. Lost inside the many, many bottles and trash littering the dingy set (designed by Michael Palumbo), the five characters, Old Scratch included, are really obliterating themselves to escape the pain of their wasted existences. As this moving play reaches its climax, Blackton delivers one long, passionate speech about the true nature of hell, revealing that Satan is actually jealous of his human game mates—or maybe it's just the booze talking.

THE SEAFARER, a San Jose Station Company production, plays Wednesday–Thursday at 7:30pm, Friday–Saturday at 8pm and Sunday at 2pm through Dec. 20 at the Stage, 490 S. First St., San Jose. Tickets are \$20–\$45. (408.283.7142). www.thestage.org