

The Curious Savage finds beauty in differences

Arts Scene

by Heather Solomon

Evy Kartus Solomon and Bryan Libero are on opposite sides of the stage apron for *The Curious Savage*, Solomon as an actor and Libero as the director.

But they are on the same page when it comes to lauding playwright John Patrick's desire to banish the stigma attached to mental illness and challenge accepted definitions of what it means to be sane. This is community theatre comedy-drama at its emotional and meaningful best, mounted by Lakeshore Players Dorval at the Louise Chalmers Theatre, 501 St. Jean Blvd. in Pointe Claire from April 28 to May 7.

"The show is set in a place called the Cloisters, a sanatorium for people who can't function in what they call 'normal' society," says Libero, who has been conducting rehearsals since November.

The playwright, in his foreword, emphasizes that the characters are not lunatics, but guests in a private facility. They are supposed to be played with warmth and charm, while visitors from outside the

Cloisters are rendered as humourless stiffs. "This raises the question of who belongs in such a place? Who really are the weird ones?" asks the director.

The story follows the generous-hearted Ethel Savage, who has been unfairly committed to the Cloisters by her greedy stepchildren. They covet the \$10 million left to her by their late father that she has earmarked, to their horror, for a fund to help others realize their dreams.

Mrs. Savage manages to make fools of them, and her beloved fellow "inmates" conspire to dispatch them. Meanwhile, audiences get a peek into the causes of their disorders, which range from wartime post-traumatic stress to denial of the loss of an infant.

Solomon plays one of the patients, Mrs. Paddy, whose bullying husband caused her to verbally withdraw from the world, behind her painting easel.

"Trying to flesh out her character is very fulfilling for me. The challenge is I don't have a lot of dialogue, so I have to be seen and heard in other ways," says Solomon, whose character is a linchpin in the plot as a mostly silent but expressive observer.

That she'd take on the role of devoutly Catholic Mrs. Paddy is all part of Solo-



Bryan Libero directs Evy Kartus Solomon in *The Curious Savage* for Lakeshore Players Dorval, April 28-May 7. HEATHER SOLOMON PHOTO

mon's talent for variety. In *I am a Camera* for Level II Theatre, she played the anti-Semitic Fraulein Schneider.

"Being a Jew, that was the hardest role for me. My late parents were Holocaust survivors," she says. "The only way I could play her was to look at it as a way of educating the public."

Libero, who often performs with the Dora Wasserman Yiddish Theatre, had an equally difficult time as a Nazi who guns down a Jew in the streets of Vienna in *Soul Doctor* at the Segal Centre.

"The happiest part of the closing night show was when I said I never have to put this stupid uniform on again," he recalls.

Solomon drew upon her Jewishness for the February production *Like Mother, Like Daughter* at Espace Libre, an improvised documentary performance featuring a dozen Jewish mothers and their real-life daughters.

She is able to bring her day job as a social worker to bear on *The Curious Savage*.

"I worked in community psychiatry at the Douglas Hospital in the early '70s, and I had a key to locked wards. For the past four years, I've been at Summit School working with the families of developmentally disabled children and giving individual counselling to some of the kids and their teachers."

Despite the serious and poignant moments of the play, Solomon says, "People won't feel sad or down afterward. There's a tremendous amount of humour in it. Whenever you see someone who finds contentment in life after having gone through tragedy, it's hard not to feel good about it." ■

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