

AN EMPTY PLATE IN THE CAFÉ DU GRAND BOEUF

By Michael Hollinger

Generic Theater

Down Under Chrysler Hall

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For tickets call: 757-441-2160 or www.generictheater.org

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large.

What's wrong when a play is supposed to be funny and nobody laughs? That's what I kept thinking when I saw this somewhat blurry work by Mark Hollinger. Granted it has some serious elements but it is basically a farce, not a comedy.

Farce is to comedy what melodrama is to tragedy. Farcical elements include exaggerated characters dominated by the plot which is possible but not very probable. The incidents of the plot call for little thought and must move very rapidly and be fleetingly believable. The object is laughter that may coexist with serious matters.

The plot of AN EMPTY PLATE . . . closely follows these guidelines. An ex-pat American millionaire named Victor, given a rather plodding performance by Miguel Girona, owns the Café. It is fully staffed twenty four hours a day but Victor and his mistress are the only people allowed to dine there. Victor is a world traveler who quotes Hemingway a lot for some reason. At the opening of the play, the staff is awaiting his return from one of his journeys. The staff consists of an arrogant chef, a stuttering waiter, a female server, and a pompous maitre'd. We soon learn that their love lives are all mixed up. The maitre'd is married to the female server but is bisexual and has a thing for the young and handsome waiter who stutters and is in love with the wife who wants to travel and be a president's bride. She dresses like Jackie Kennedy in a pink Chanel suit with a ripped seam and a pill box hat. Sound familiar? When Victor arrives sans his mistress, he quotes some muddled Hemingway and announces that he is starving himself to death. To cheer him up and persuade him to change his mind they serve him an imaginary dinner.

Jeannette Rainy has directed the cast in a very de-energized manner. What should be a whirlwind of choreographed slapstick, insane fun is a gloomy ninety minutes of everyone being sad. There is no flare, no French flourish. Except for the fun background of the set, designed by Nicholas Thornburg, the café could be on Granby Street or in Pungo. The core of the action, the staff's frantic attempts to save Victor's life, is never dealt with in a believable manner. They pose and posture sadness. They are busy "being" instead of busy "doing". As a result, they lack definition and individuality. Victor, after all, is their source of income and they are paid well for doing little. To lose him would be catastrophic. In addition, we never get to know Victor. Director Rainy has him playing one note only. What kind of man would open such a restaurant? What kind of ego must he have? Does he really intend to starve himself to death? With better directorial choices, I think the cast which includes Luke Crownover, Alicia Defonzo, Ian Geers, Catherine Gendel and Jonathon Moots are all capable of bringing life to this static conception. The same can be said for Mr. Girona. There is a sort of surprising ending.

I quite frankly am not sure what the author feels his play is about. There are several possible themes involving love, satisfaction and being careful about what one wishes. In this production, however, this under cooked farce concerned with slow food francais desperately wants fast food energy.

This is Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large and I'll see you at the next opening.