

THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

By Robert Ruffin

Virginia Premiere Theatre

Dec.5,9,10,12,16,17,19 at the Kimball Theatre

Dec.4,6,11,13,18,20,22,23,24 at The Yoder Barn Theatre

For tickets call: 1-866-430-1630 or <http://www.vptheatre.com/>

Hello, I'm Edgar Loessin with Loessin at Large

We probably all remember studying O' Henry's "The Gift of the Magi". It's used as a perfect example of dramatic irony. An extremely poor young couple, Della and Jim, are determined to give Christmas gifts to each other. She cuts off her hair and sells it to a wig maker to buy him a watch fob. He sells his watch to buy her some pretty combs to go in her long hair. They have sacrificed for each other, out of love, the greatest treasures of their house.

This short story is very short indeed. It only takes minutes to read it. How do you make a full theatre piece from so little material? Playwright Ruffin solves the problem brilliantly. He does what many actors and directors do to understand fully the characters they are developing. They explore and imagine the circumstances and events in the earlier lives of the people leading up to the action of the present. Ruffin takes Della and Jim back to their youth. We learn that they are both orphans. They meet through Jim's law professor in Charlottesville, Virginia. The professor has become a sort of surrogate father to his bright "spirited stallion" of a student. The professor's friend, Mrs. Tyler, has served in the same role for Della. The young couple fall instantly in love and are soon married. They move to New York.

Ruffin allows time to ebb and flow, going from the early 1900's in Charlottesville to somewhere in a distant time and place in New York. Director Steven Breese weaves these back and forth transitions seamlessly. They happen as quickly and spontaneously as a tear drop. John Tracy's musical score makes an immense contribution to the ever shifting flow and atmosphere of the action. George Hillow's acrobatic set can suggest a New York flat, a fire escape, a Virginia parlor, you name it, with a slight change of Lausanne Davis-Carpenter's exceptionally fine lighting.

To make possible his expansion of the story, Ruffin uses five actors. All but Della play multiple roles. Even Bryon Wakefield, who makes Jim a likeable, straight forward and sensitive guy plays one of the wise men who begin the show.

We learn why the young couple is so poor and a whole lot more from the additional characters created by Ruffin. Especially noteworthy are Ron Reid's Professor Tinsdale and Tamara Johnson's five ladies. Ed Whitacre proves he is a quick change artist with six men in his acting cauldron. Amaree Cluff emphasizes the soft, sweet side of Della. A little more spunk and perkiness would add much needed zest.

Ruffin's dialogue works best when it's simple and direct. At times he uses lines from Shakespeare and even rhymed couplets which I find a little florid.. The actors seem uncomfortable dealing with these intrusions. I might also quibble about the final scene. For me it lacked warmth in the formal manner in which it was staged.

However, I found the evening as a whole a warm Christmas offering and a welcome, pleasant and original change from that adaptation of Mr. Dickens's novel that everybody else does. Let the Magi give you your first holiday present.

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