

Review | 'Beer' at the Heartland is funny but forced

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Workin' hard.

That's what I thought as I watched a talented cast put its collective shoulder to a new comedy called "Beer for Breakfast" and push it uphill at the American Heartland Theatre.

Playwright Sean Grennan writes clever dialogue, and his play delivers some serious laughs, but the plotting seems forced, to put it mildly. This is a situation comedy beefed up with sexual humor and, inevitably, a big helping of sentimentality.

The burden is on the actors — one of whom is Grennan — to make the artificial relationships onstage seem plausible, if not convincing. That they succeed at least part of the time is a testament to their talent.

I can't really call the play imitative, because Grennan seems to be doing his own thing. But it has the feel of something we've seen before.

On one level it's a sort of male response to "Menopause the Musical." No, this isn't a musical, but bringing together three middle-aged men who have been slapped around by real life and now seek meaning in an uncertain world does invite comparisons to undemanding shows we've seen about world-weary gals finding strength in each other.

The setup: On a cold winter night three old college friends come together in a lakeside vacation house for a weekend of drinking, eating bad food and horsing around as they did back in the good old days.

The good old days, however, are long gone. Mark (Grennan) is a newspaper writer who's been laid off but continues freelancing. Richard (Martin English) has had a stroke and now walks with a limp and can't speak clearly. TJ (Scott Cordes) is an advertising executive being pushed out by young hipsters.

They expect to be joined by a fourth friend, but he never arrives. As they proceed to drink and prepare to whip up some heart-clogging chili, they are surprised when Jessie (Cathy Barnett), the wife of the missing friend, shows up with sacks of healthy snacks from Whole Foods and throws away all the potato chips and outdated hamburger meat.

The animosity between TJ and Jessie is palpable and takes the form of a male vs. female "contest" that involves playing truth or dare and competitive belching, among other things. The notion of a "dudes against the chicks" game of one-upmanship seems trite, but the actors make the most of it.

Ultimately the missing friend's absence is explained in an unconvincing revelation that provides the four characters a reason to bond and move forward with optimism.

Director Paul Hough (who also designed the utilitarian costumes) keeps things moving at a lively pace, although a number of the jokes misfired at the Wednesday night performance. Dominating the proceedings is Cordes, who chalks up another expansive performance as he slips inside the skin of a big talker who isn't quite as smart as he thinks he is. Cordes gets many of the best lines and, with his acute sense of timing, delivers them with sharp-edged flair.

Grennan, by contrast, takes a low-key approach, too much so at times. His deadpan delivery sometimes pays comic dividends, but his monotone wears a bit thin. English offers a precise and very human performance as Richard, and although the character's frequently unintelligible slur is played for laughs, there's nothing mean-spirited about it.

Barnett is the queen of one-liners, but the script doesn't give her many. Even so, Barnett has an almost off-handed delivery that makes phony dialogue seem credible.

Grennan has attempted to write a comedy with heart. That's a worthy goal, and at times the show comes to life and allows us to see what it could have been. Too often, it seems, he undermines his best intentions with plot twists that defy credibility and laughs that seem too easy, if not simply cheap.