

Langhorne Players Focus on Humanity of Alzheimer's Sufferers in *The Waverly Gallery*

Newtown, Pennsylvania – We've all heard the jokes, and it helps to laugh, but the truth is that at some point in everyone's lives, they will be touched by the ravages of Alzheimer's Disease. A study released just yesterday (August 18, 2003) from the National Institute on Aging (NIA) indicates a strong upward trend in the incidence of Alzheimer's Disease among those 85 years and older, with scientists predicting that some 13.2 million older Americans will have Alzheimer's disease (AD) by 2050 unless new ways are found to prevent or treat the disease.

It's easier to look away, but—as is their way—the Langhorne Players instead turn to face this looming threat head-on. From August 15-30, the cutting-edge theater group is staging productions of playwright Kenneth Lonergan's *The Waverly Gallery*.

Refusing to look away

A poignant and sincere play about the final years of a gregarious, feisty grandmother's final battle against this formidable foe, *Waverly* has already proven powerfully touching to the Players' audiences. After the production's second performance on August 16, a "talkback" provided an opportunity for audience mem

bers to discuss the play's difficult, often wrenching themes.

"I actually wanted to leave after Act I (because the subject is so painful)," admitted one audience member, "but something changed in Act II. Something redeemed the pain. It was worth it." Another patron agreed: "What made it less painful was that lots of the lines are tragic and yet equally hilarious. I found myself laughing at things that, in real life, aren't funny at all."

This ability to go to the heart of the matter is something Lonergan is known for, and this play blooms with his trademark humor and genius for capturing the real heart and soul of human interactions. In lesser hands, the production could turn gloomy and maudlin, but in the capable acting of the Players, under the masterful direction of Lois Carr, *The Waverly Gallery* delivers on its promise of hope despite the pain.

"The very last line, I loved it!" enthused another participant in the audience talkback. "To me it said, 'Even though in life all of us at times go through Hell, life is worth living,' and I was like, Yeah!"

Exploring the struggle

The play's lead character, Gladys, is an old-school lefty and social activist, and the longtime owner of a small art gallery in Greenwich Village. The play explores her fight to retain her independence in the face of Alzheimer's onset, and the subsequent effect of her decline on her family, especially her grandson.

More than a memory play, *The Waverly Gallery* captures the humor, strength and deeply felt compassion of a family in the face of crisis. In a sense, this beautifully written play embodies what the Langhorne Players do best: honest tribute to the great experience we all share... living and loving.

74-year-old Pat Ellis, a longtime actor in area theater, plays the lead role in her third Players production, for which she auditioned after reading the script. "Alzheimer's Disease is a problem that's very prominent in society today. At some point, everyone's going to be touched by it," she says. "It's a well-written play that everyone can relate to in some way."

Ellis points up the dichotomies that make the piece so engaging: "Gladys was a very accomplished person in her earlier years; a brilliant socialite, a successful lawyer. And then she is reduced to babbling away about nothing relevant to the conversation at hand. She's just having a ball, but it's really touching to see such a sharp mind going."

New Hope psychotherapist Ann Gunsenheimer plays Ellen, Gladys' daughter. The usual mother-daughter relationship conflicts are only exacerbated by Gladys' affliction, and Ellen struggles with the situation as a matter of personal survival. This is Ann's third show with the Players, having appeared in *The Credeaux Canvas*, and the lead role in *A Fair Country*.

Curt Herr, longtime Players member and current Vice President, plays Daniel, Gladys' grandson. He narrates the story through several monologues, which Herr says have "a real good push-me-pull-you effect" on the audience, bringing them into the performance.

"This is the hardest play I've ever done," admits the veteran of decades on the stage. "The way the author wrote the monologues is so real. Daniel becomes very naked by admitting his imperfection in dealing with the situation." He also describes dialogue scenes in which the characters overlap their lines in realistically messy, emotional fashion. That technical challenge has the actors going over that scene in their dressing room every night before they hit the stage.

Herr says it's not just a difficult play for the actors, either. "It asks the audience to come along on this scary ride. We know it's going to hurt, but we keep going."

Jim Perry agrees with Herr's take on the play. He plays Don Bowman, a young Boston artist who struggles for recognition and finds a home at Gladys' gallery. "I love how real it is," he says. "This is a real family going through trouble. It can happen to anybody."

This play reminds you that, hey, we're human." Perry has been with the Players for about ten years, and most recently directed the first production of this season, *Laundry and Bourbon, Lone Star*. He read for this part because he respects Lonergan's work and wanted to work under Carr's direction. "She communicates well with her actors, and I've always wanted the chance to work with her," he explains.

The actors' enthusiasm is paying off, if audience reaction is any measure. During the talkback, they were gratified to hear one person say their mission to provide thought-provoking theater had been fulfilled. "Watching the characters' varied reactions made you wonder," he said, "and think who you wanted to be, if you were in that spot."

When asked if they felt watching the play was worth the hurt, one woman immediately spoke up. "Yes! This is worth the journey. I felt like a piece of the show, part of the family." Another member added, "I felt the frustration and the immense love. There is a little of Gladys in all of us."

The lobby of the Spring Garden Mill Theater, the Langhorne Players' home stage, is running an exhibition of original artwork by Alzheimer's patients concurrent with the production of *The Waverly Gallery*.

Showtimes are on Wednesdays, Thursdays and Sundays at 7:30 PM; Fridays and Saturdays at 8:30 PM. Tickets are \$10 – \$12, available with reservations through the box office at 215-860-0818. Interested readers can learn more about the theater group and venue on their website at www.langhorneplayers.org.

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