

THEATER REVIEW - Cedar Rapids Gazette 9-7-08

'Stones' Engrosses You in Characters

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Marie Jones' "Stones in His Pocket," the opening production of Riverside Theatre's 28th season, is a play with a gimmick: Two actors, Tim Budd and Jim Van Valen, play 15 characters.

On the face of it, the biggest challenge for the actors is that of rapidly changing from one character to another with just a few costume details to aid in the effort. There are voices, accents and mannerisms to remember and keep straight, and moments when an actor must carry on a conversation with himself.

But the most impressive accomplishment of the duo is more subtle and arises from the actors' mastery of the shifting tone of each moment, which enables them to convey an impressive range of emotion. At the end of the first act, for example, Budd and Van Valen brilliantly blend the play's funniest moment with its most moving. The effect is devastating.

The play, directed by Riverside Theatre Artistic Director Jody Hovland, centers on Charlie Conlon (Budd) and Jake Quinn (Van Valen), two Irishmen working as extras on an American movie being filmed on the Emerald Isle. Charlie dreams of the moment someone will read his movie script and discover his genius while Jake finds himself embroiled with the movie's female lead.

Much of the time, the play is very funny and the humor is amplified by the quick changes from character to character. Each actor slides in and out of these parts with impressive ease.

It is a script that turns a bit self-referential toward the end, though it's arguable that the play investigates — or at least raises — interesting questions about the role of happy endings in theater and movies.

Lindsey Robinson has provided a wonderful set of costumes to facilitate the character changes. One is left to wonder about the collection of unutilized footwear Olinger has set along a low stone wall upstage, but this doesn't distract in any significant way.