

THEATER REVIEW – CEDAR RAPIDS GAZETTE, 10/26/08

Taut drama reflects other side of cancer

By Marcella Lee
Freelance reviewer

One would have to have a heart of stone not to be moved by the powerful little play written by Ron Clark, resident artist at Riverside Theatre, that premiered Friday night.

“Coffee and Hope” has a one-note theme, a not uncommon one, of women stricken by breast cancer. What makes it unique and therefore all the more absorbing is the point of view — that of the husband or lover who suffers through the long, wrenching journey along with the woman in his life.

In his playwright’s note, Clark discloses the autobiographical nature of the play. He describes how “the bright orange chemical coursed its way down a tube toward the needle in her arm, and she said, ‘Let the games begin!’ Beginning with that moment, Jody Hovland taught me over and over again the real meaning of grace and courage.”

The setting is a waiting room in a women’s cancer center. Twelve men of various ages and occupations find themselves in that room, stopping for coffee and a bit of idle chat, or perhaps racing through it in great anxiety. These 12 men are played by four actors — Tim Budd, John Watkins, David Q. Combs and Brian Bentz — who generally succeed at portraying the different characters by a change of clothes and a change of style.

The men are weary, distraught, bitter or just plain scared. And most of the time, another man, Frank, played with beautifully nuanced calm by Clark, provides a sounding board for them. Not until near the end of the play do we realize we have heard everyone’s story but his.

Incidental music is provided by Deb Tiemens. Her original songs are pleasing, though not memorable. They lighten the tone of the first half of the 90 minute play. Wisely, there are no songs in the second half, in which singing no longer seems appropriate.

Watkins delivers an extremely poignant monologue describing how he arrived too late, just after his wife had died.

“Coffee and Hope” is a wonderful play and well worth seeing. But be forewarned: If you have lost a loved one to cancer, you might find it too close to home for comfort. On the other hand, it could also provide a welcome catharsis. In either case, keep the Kleenex handy.