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Photo by Katie Pfeiffer

Andy Robinson as Frank Hardy stars in Brian Friel's "Faith Healer," running through Aug. 17 as part of Stanford Summer Theater.

'Faith' challenges reason

Stanford production explores holy con man's 'gift'

By John Angell Grant / Theater Reviewer

Since God was killed off by reason more than 200 years ago during the Enlightenment, what's a traveling faith healer to do?

In Irish writer Brian Friel's absorbing play "Faith Healer," one particular man drifts from town to town, setting up shop for one-night stands, trying to perform miracles. Every once in a while a miracle happens.

This intriguing and rarely performed 1979 show is running at Stanford Summer Theater.

"Faith Healer" is the story of traveling Irish con man Frank Hardy, who appears to have some sort of occasional healing gift. Frank wanders the countryside of Wales and Scotland with his English wife Grace and cockney manager, Teddy, setting up in small villages for one-nighters as an itinerant faith healer.

The blind and the lame show up to be healed. Nine times out of 10, Frank is unsuccessful. In these cases, he sometimes resorts to getting his customers drunk in order to ease them out the door and assuage their retributive anger.

Every once in a while Frank appears to perform a miracle. One astonishing evening, all 10 blind or lame people who showed up were cured. That miracle made it into the local paper, in a clipping Frank carries around, and into that village's local lore.

The play is told in a series of long, intertwined monologues by Frank, his wife Grace and manager Teddy. The three characters report, with varying personal spins, on chapters of their shared lives. (There's a touch of "Rashomon" in this play.)

The three also work back into earlier times before they met, trying to gauge some understanding of the meaning of their relationship. All yearn for a dream.

Although that dream is not clearly spelled out, all three seem to desire something beyond the finite material world. All three are captivated by the non-rational experience of Frank's occasional faith healing successes.

A sense of magic is achieved effectively in this show by the recurring use of the Jerome Kern song "The Way You Look Tonight," sung by Fred Astaire. That song makes a motif appearance again and again as a favorite of the three characters. Their story slowly unwinds to an unexpected outcome.

"Faith Healer" is an emotional marathon, and a tricky play to stage effectively. For sure it's an actor's play - big time. Performing entirely in monologues, the three Stanford performers worked alone in rehearsal, independent of each other, although in performance they now occupy the stage together.

It's almost as though each actor has to perform his or her own separate play. Intertwining those three separate plays is then a big challenge.

As Grace, Courtney Walsh Phleger's earnestness seemed disconnected from the other two characters. As Frank, Andy Robinson's ability to make a quick descent into the faith healer's possessed spirit sometimes blocked, paradoxically, a deeper and richer personality.

On opening night, Jeffrey Bihl's cockney manager Teddy was the brightest stage presence. Teddy drinks beer in his lounging jacket as he looks back over his career from the perspective of retirement.

Teddy's rambling anecdotes about various chapters in his life, such as managing a bagpipe-playing show dog, created both a sense of mosaic and a connection to the importance of his 20-year relationship with Frank and Grace.

In director Rush Rehm's Stanford production, the wife and husband struggle between Grace and Frank coheres best in Teddy's second-act monologue segment, but not before.

On one level, this play is about the conflict between faith and reason. Faith says yes, and reason says no. If one wants to live a life of the spirit that says yes, what is one to do?

Rating: Three stars

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