

# 'I and You' explores teen life with tenderness

By KATHLEEN PALMER

Staff Writer

When a play brazenly advertises that it has “an ending that will leave you breathless,” one may enter the audience with a bit of jaded skepticism. One may wonder if their bold assertion could possibly be true.

With “I and You,” presented by Merrimack Repertory Theatre through Nov. 1, this bold assertion is met and exploded, like a dazzling array of fireworks in an inky night sky.

The new play by brilliant dialogue master Lauren Gunderson – on its way to New York City after its premiere run in Lowell, Mass., and directed by MRT’s new artistic director Sean Daniels – centers around Caroline (Kayla Ferguson), a teen confined to her room by a liver ailment, who is unexpectedly visited by Anthony (Reggie D. White), a classmate who’s her unbeknownst partner in a school project on Walt Whitman’s “Leaves of Grass.” The teens verbally spar back and forth – literally from the instant the lights comes up – tentatively feeling each other out as to likes, dislikes, and whether trust can be extended. The dialogue crackles with realness and is delivered with rapid-fire intensity, earnestness and a large dose of hilarity. We’re drawn instantly into Caroline’s insular world and the sudden intrusion of Anthony, friendly and guileless though he may be.

Caroline’s universe is spectacularly realized by scenic designer Michael Carnahan’s MRT debut. What a bedroom he’s created for this teen! The colorfully collaged walls are covered with unusual celebrity memorabilia for a modern teen; Caroline professes to love Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis. The walls

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hold Beatles and Lennon photos. The three-wall set includes a magnificent back wall that is boned and curved like a ship’s hold. There is more to this beautiful feat of a set that will remain for you to discover.

As Caroline, Ferguson has the right level of pent-up energy and emotions, like a shaken-up bottle of carbonated soda. At first angry and wary, often frustrated, and throughout, filled with the joy of discovery as she explores Whitman’s poetry with Anthony. When she finally decides it’s safe to trust and open up to him, her relief is palpable – she spills out her dreams of the future in a tender, hopeful cascade.

As Anthony, White delivers a sweet, nervous, sincere young man (playwright Gunderson wrote the part with the actor in mind; this is his first opportunity to perform it), who loves poetry, Coltrane jazz and basketball. He seems willing to patiently calm and placate Caroline, as he tries to fix their school project and grow their fledgling friendship.

It’s a lovely device to have these young people recite passages, evaluate meanings and find ways to relate to “Leaves of Grass,” specifically “Song of Myself.” And there is a truly brilliant turn where one particular line of poetry suddenly shocks us into a realization. The teens discuss the opus and declare his new designation “Walt Whitman: National Badass.”

The purported theme of the play is that the two disparate characters have more in common than

they believe. And this is true, as we discover. But for this audience member, it is also about isolation – the isolation we feel as teenagers, whether or not we’re confined to our room by illness or by choice; or confined to the roles of our gender or our race; and significantly for Caroline, the new-normal modern isolation of our walls of technology, and the false intimacy we derive from “social” media. Caroline’s whole interaction with the world outside her bedroom is via text messages (the only way she communicates with her own mom), the internet, Facebook and Twitter. Her passion for photography keeps her at once safely behind more technology, but also connects her to the outside world in its way.

The 80-minute, no-intermission show does indeed end with us gasping and breathless. Gunderson said in an interview “there’s nothing like a gasp. A well-timed gasp makes me very, very happy as a playwright.” Mission accomplished. This is a master work of dialogue, storytelling and set design, and another brilliant presentation by MRT.

It is worth noting a significant new offering by the theater company: MRT now has free – that word again was “free” – child-care, from an hour before to an hour after select performances. The licensed child care providers will enable parents to not miss quality theater because of babysitting concerns. Contact MRT for details.

This level of theater so close to home and so affordable is a real gift. Now you have no excuse to miss it.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF MEGHAN MOORE

Kayla Ferguson and Reggie D. White star in “I and You” at Merrimack Repertory Theatre in Lowell, Mass., through Nov. 1.

## Arlington Street United Methodist Church

63 Arlington St., Nashua

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*(includes boiled potato, turnip, carrots and a choice of beverages and dessert)*



**Sat., Oct. 17, 2015**  
**Family Style Supper**  
**4:30 - 6:30 PM**

**Adults \$11**  
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**Free for Children**  
**Under Age 5**

### Carry Out Meals Available

The blood pressure screening will be done by the Parish Nurse Center for Wellness during supper hours.

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