

Don't miss MRT's stellar 'The Outgoing Tide'

By KATHLEEN PALMER

Staff Writer

The most difficult thing about writing this review was worrying about using too many superlatives.

Merrimack Repertory Theatre's production of "The Outgoing Tide" is, simply, a triumph. It's the best thing I've seen from an organization that has given me, personally, two years of terrific shows. It is a fitting tribute to outgoing artistic director Charles Towers that his final stint as director is this incredible piece.

Playwright Bruce Graham ("Stella and Lou") has crafted such a word-perfect script and engaging story, I was hanging on the actors' every word, every nuance, every twist. Graham's writing is peppered with rapid-fire jokes that don't have a clunker in the bunch; some are wincingly funny, because of the subject matter, but you can't not laugh. When the main character's wife (portrayed with loving, frustrated annoyance by Felicity LaFortune) cries out to him "Are you out of your mind?!", her husband (the brilliant Ross Bickell) calmly replies "Not right now. But stick around, you never know."

But humor is just one of the experiences Graham's writing cycles you through during "The Outgoing Tide." The story of a man struggling with the onset of dementia may not sound like a laugh-riot, but there's plenty of humor found in the pages of a script that will also stun you into silence, surprise you with twists, and definitely move you – perhaps to tears, as it did me.

This show is so well-crafted, an artistic argument could even be made that Act I could stand alone as a short work. Though the

IF YOU GO

Merrimack Repertory Theatre presents 'The Outgoing Tide'

WHEN: Through May 15. See website for dates and times.

WHERE: Nancy L. Donohue Theater, 50 E. Merrimack St., Lowell, Mass.

COST: \$20-\$60.

TICKETS/INFORMATION: 1-978-654-4678, box_office@mrt.org, bit.ly/1JOUquc or visit www.mrt.org.

story is far from finished at intermission, the first act is so good and clear in its intentions, I could see it being done as a standalone piece that leaves room for post-show discussion of what could have happened. But we're fortunate to have the

story continued for us in Act II.

Husband and wife Gunner and Peg have a home on Chesapeake

Bay, represented by an absolutely beautiful set designed by James Fenton. I have to imagine Fenton's intention for deliberately making the multilevel areas of the home not level was to represent the shifting reality of dementia patient Gunner, and how his family's life was becoming off-kilter. It's a subtle and smart vehicle to have the characters navigating these uneven, crooked levels throughout their journey in this play.

Gunner and Peg's adult son Jack (the always great David Adkins) is going through a divorce. Gunner invites him out to the house and surprises him and Peg with the announcement that he will never move into the assisted-living facility Peg has been scouting, and in fact, has a much different plan for dealing with his

situation.

There are many excellent cutaways in the main action to the family's interactions of the past, which slowly reveal puzzle pieces that explain current circumstances and consequences. The parallels between Gunner and Jack's relationship and that of Jack and his own son are intriguing. And we see how Peg – like so many women of her generation – gave up her own plans and dreams and dedicated her life to her family, and how, like it or not, she would continue to be devoted to that mission until the end. LaFortune's portrayal of a loving but frustrated wife who's sacrificed it all will ring true for many audience-goers.

These three actors form a believable family unit, and are all strong in their characters. But this show belongs to Bickell. His ability to rapidly snap back and forth from clarity to dementia, as well as flawless comedic delivery and turns of every emotion, make for a magnetic performance.

When my own family was touched by Alzheimer's disease, I likened the heartbreaking departure of our loved one's memory as "like watching her slowly sail away from us." Graham titling his play "The Outgoing Tide" is doubly appropriate, as we discover, and very much hit home for me.

Graham's "Stella and Lou" was the first play I saw at MRT, and it set a high bar. "The Outgoing Tide" demolishes that bar, and raises it to another level. Audiences and actors alike will surely miss Towers and the significant impact he's made on that theater in his 14-year tenure as creative director. "The Outgoing Tide" is a perfect finale to his career with MRT, and will offer the new guard a reference point to just how excellent live theater can be.

Don't miss this show.

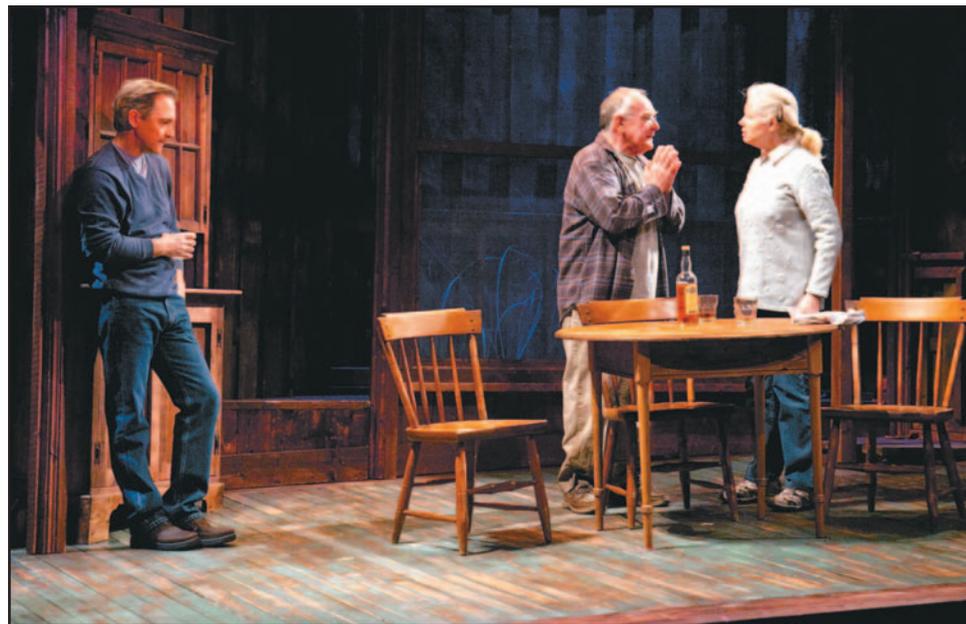


Photo courtesy of MEGHAN MOORE

From left, David Adkins, Ross Bickell and Felicity LaFortune, in Merrimack Repertory Theatre's production of Bruce Graham's "The Outgoing Tide."

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