

# Cuckow's thin script and unexplored characters far from heaven-sent

Local playwright's tale of Mormons, mothers, and sons is witty, but tries and fails to illuminate the darker aspects of humanity

## theatrereview

### Three Different Heavens

Runs until 9 March

Written by Nathan Cuckow

Directed by Trevor Schmidt

Starring Coralie Cairns, Blair Wensley

Third Space (11516 103 street)

DAVID JOHNSTON

Arts & Entertainment Staff

You have to hand it to Northern Lights Theatre: their new production, the world premiere of Nathan Cuckow's *Three Different Heavens*, managed to hold the audience's attention, even though it features not one but two unlikely relationships between a straightlaced Mormon from Drayton Valley and a bar-hopping Edmontonian party animal.

Blair Wensley and Coralie Cairns take on multiple character structure as Susan (Cairns) and Joyce (Wensley), two mothers theatrically retelling the tragic story of their sons, Jonathan and David, in order to "show what really happened."

If this seems like a weak reason to move the story forward, it isn't the last time this flaw pops up; *Heavens* often sacrifices logical explanation and structure for dramatic effect. The theatrical convention of having Cairns and Wensley also play Jonathan and David is a perfect example of this: though the actresses credibly construct their sons, the situation lacks the insights or emotions that would normally come from this kind of multi-casting. The audience is given very little about how Susan



and Joyce feel about re-enacting their sons' lives other than that Joyce, the Mormon doesn't want to be liberally flinging the "F-word" around.

Likewise, we're led to believe that we'll learn about why Joyce and Susan are friends. Instead, we're given the story of how Joyce and Susan met—similar, yes, but what we're actually given isn't nearly as interesting as it would be if the two women actually invested time and energy into openly questioning what stabilizes their odd-couple friendship.

The big issues with the production ultimately lie in the script. Cuckow

creates this fantastic situation and parallel structure, but sadly writes very little to flesh it out. We never get to the meat of these characters—or of the story, for that matter. It feels very odd to say a Nathan Cuckow production doesn't push the envelope enough, but it's rather that certain edges aren't pushed. The subject matter is edgy—the way the characters deal with the subject matter is what's underdeveloped.

It's not that the four characters Cairns and Wensley evoke onstage are uncomplicated—the energy and subtleties the actresses bring to their respective roles are both notable

and nuanced, with Cairns' quietly reserved Jonathan a standout portrayal. The bigger problem is that they're simply not given enough to do. For a play about a pair of collapsing families, it's remarkably clean and elegant. Susan, Joyce, David, and Jonathan are all lovely people who get along mostly for reasons that either can't be elaborated upon or simply aren't ever brought up. But no one ever really gets to an ugly, emotional place in the story, and that's where the drama should lie. Some pretty horrible things happen to Susan and Joyce, yet we get to live practically

none of the fallout from their acceptance of this.

If taken as nothing more than a nice, light evening at the theatre, then *Three Different Heavens* works beautifully: the dialogue is witty; Trevor Schmidt's direction and sets are simple and elegant, perfectly servicing the story; and the second act contains, among other things, the funniest Mormon-history slideshow I've ever seen. It's when it tries to explore to the dark, difficult places of humanity and difficulty that *Heavens* unfortunately comes crashing back down to Earth.

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