

Review: Centre Stage offers poignant production of 'Irena's Vow'

Written by Paul Hyde Arts Writer

Dec. 7, 2013 |

greenvilleonline.com

Set against the horror of the Holocaust, "Irena's Vow" may seem like odd theatrical fare for the holidays.

Actually, though, the play ultimately is about hope and redemption, making it a perfect fit for the season.

Centre Stage is offering a poignant and powerful production of "Irena's Vow" as a part of its Tuesday Night Fringe Series of edgy, offbeat material.

Dan Gordon's play, based on a real story, centers on Irena Gut Opdyke, a young Polish Catholic woman who risks her life to help a dozen Jews during World War II.

The 19-year-old Irena (Jennifer Alynn-Perri) becomes the housekeeper for a highly respected Nazi officer, Major Rugemer (Richard Beveridge), and hides her Jewish friends in the basement of his home.

The story is told in a mere 70 minutes through the narration of the older Irena (Shirley Sarlin), who addresses the audience as a class of high school students to whom she has been asked to speak about her experiences.

In short order, actors appear on the stage to continue the story.

Irena uses her wit, humor and courage to hide her friends for two years until the end of the German occupation, concealing them in the midst of countless Nazi parties, a blackmail scheme and even the birth of a child.

"Irena's Vow" veers occasionally toward melodrama but without any loss of emotional force.

The play also provides some surprising laughs. The major can hardly believe how much work Irena accomplishes around the house. Actually, her friends downstairs are helping with the chores.

"Honestly, Irena, you've done the work of six people," the major says after a party.

"More," Irena responds.

Director Melanie Ann Wiliford's staging is fluent, focused and dynamic. The cast is strong, despite some apparent opening-night jitters on Tuesday.

Alynn-Perri, a lovely actress, offers an eloquent, sympathetic performance as the young Irena.

Beveridge brings a conflicted humanity to the role of the Nazi Major Rugemer.

Sarlin, as the older Irena, strikes the right tone with her straightforward narration, although on opening night I thought she spoke a bit too softly at times.

Solid contributions are provided by Christopher Rose, Hannah E. Smith, Libby Ricardo, Jonathan Kilpatrick, Charles Poore, Graham Poore and Nick Kulmala.

Two more Tuesday performances remain of this compelling “Irena’s Vow,” on Dec. 10 and 17. Tickets are \$15. For more information, call 864-233-6733.