

The Cemetery Club is great theatre in Erin

By Marilyn Edridge-Bellicoso

Erin Community Theatre has presented many memorable productions over the years, among them their amazing production of *Calendar Girls* and most recently *Steel Magnolias*, their wonderful tribute to the gentle strength of southern women.

In many ways, their current play, Ivan Menchell's *The Cemetery Club*, was anticipated by these two productions. There is no chorus of supporting characters or generations of women.

The story line in *The Cemetery Club* is distilled down to the lives of three Jewish widows. These are ladies of a certain age who have seen it all. However, they are not world weary for all their cultural expressions of ennui and indifference. They are knowing but not shrewd, incisive but without being biting. Their friendly, sometimes acerbic, banter is warm and good-natured. These three are sisters under the skin, who have been together from their youth. They have shared joy and sorrow, comforting and supporting each other through the worst times in their lives, including the deaths of their husbands. They play canasta together, go to the movies together and they meet once every month to visit their husbands' graves. It is this shared duty from which the play title derives and it is this act of devotion, which is causing the divisions between them.

Doris (played by Angela Gibson) is wholly devoted to her late husband and in the words of Lucille (Carol McCone Day) lives her life with her head under ground where all she sees is Abe.

The flirty and flamboyant Lucille has had enough. She is ready to move on with her life. She declares, "I refuse to continue to be part of a club where half the members are dead!"

Ida (Barb McKee) is in the middle, but leaning toward Lucille. She agrees that it is time to move on. Enter Sam (Chris Reid) an attractive widower who is also looking to move on with his life. He has tried and failed at "playing the field" as Lucille calls it. His faltering efforts have brought him to Ida and the attraction is mutual. Ida's re-awakening is heart-warming and the play of emotions, which light up McKee's face, is lovely to watch.

McCone Day as Lucille is like a hummingbird on the set, flitting from moment to moment with bright flashes of "look at me." McCone Day is delightful in this part and fully embraces both the mischief and poignancy of this character. With the flamboyant antics of Lucille stealing every scene, it might be easy to overlook the somewhat dowdy and reserved Doris. However, Gibson plays the role with great understanding of Doris's strength of character. Gibson's eyes blaze with conviction as she provides the droll and sometimes acerbic counterpoint to most of the action and always managing to get the better of the provocative Lucille.

With a cast like this, the supporting players have their work cut out for them.

Chris Reid as Sam is well cast in the part. He is the strong, gentle shoulder that any woman would want to lean on. Reid is very appealing in this role, bringing a warmth and sensitivity to the character. The role of Mildred is pivotal. She is the catalyst, which provides the slap in the face for all concerned and Donna Collins plays this to the hilt. She is brash, demanding and tactile in a way that makes everyone cringe a little. This is a small role but with great resonance.

The setting for the play is Ida's charming and comfortable parlour, with "visits" to Forest Hills cemetery. The dimensions of the play are achieved by the imaginative artwork of Susanna Lamy, which easily transports the audience between these spaces. The play is set in the 1980s and the members of the cast have done a remarkable job of re-creating this era in their styles and costumes.

This warm and funny comedy contains moments, which sound like the best "stand-up" routines you've ever heard except that the dialogue is the everyday wit and humour of this perfect slice of New York, Jewish culture. The "Who's on first?" parody played out between Lucille and Doris about when each husband died is absolutely hilarious. It would be so easy for these characters to descend into stereotypes, but in the very able hands of award winning director Kathryn Delory, this story never misses a beat. The ladies throughout are very real, human and appealing.

When excellent writing comes together with great performance, the results are magic. This is one play you should not miss. It is being performed at David's Restaurant in Erin. It runs for consecutive weekends until April 30. There are two choices offered by David's: dinner and show for \$39.95 plus tax or lunch plus matinee for \$29.95 plus tax. Buy your tickets early.

Show times are 7 p.m. and noon respectively. For reservations, call 519-833-5085.