

The Secret Mask delivers an uplifting message



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Published on: March 3, 2016 | Last Updated: March 3, 2016 11:32 PM CST

Most people wouldn't think there isn't anything funny about recovering from a stroke or dealing with the pain of parental abandonment yet *The Secret Mask* manages to find the humour in these grim situations.

The latest mainstage production from Globe Theatre, *The Secret Mask* opened Thursday night to a smaller than usual crowd. However, what the audience was lacking in numbers, it more than made up for in its appreciation of the production.

Written by Winnipeg playwright Rick Chafe, who was in the audience for Thursday's performance, *The Secret Mask* tells the story of Ernie and his son George. Ernie is in a Vancouver hospital after suffering a stroke and George, who hasn't seen his father since he walked out on the family 40 years earlier, flies in from his home in Winnipeg to care for him.

Ernie's stroke lands the two men in a totally unexpected situation, which is complicated further by the emotional baggage each man brings with them. Without giving away too much of the plot, Ernie learns more about his past while battling the recovery process from his stroke, while George juggles the stress of helping his dad, a man he barely knows, while trying to control family problems of his own.

Ernie's stroke has left him with aphasia, an impairment of language that affects the comprehension of speech and its production. As a result, the communication between Ernie and George is challenging — Ernie struggles with finding the right words to express himself while George has the difficult task of trying to understand exactly what his dad is trying to say.

The aphasia leaves Ernie speaking gibberish at times and while the fractured phrases are responsible for many laughs, the dialogue must have been a tough task to master for actor Oliver Becker. Mastering the gibberish must have been like having to learn a second language for the role.

Becker's other challenge was finding the right temperament for playing Ernie. It was important that he didn't portray Ernie as a crotchety old man who complains about everything. It's okay for Ernie to complain but it's more important for those complaints to come from the frustration in the recovery process or dealing with George's demands.

Skye Brandon, as George, delivered an impressive performance as a man not only deeply hurt by his father's betrayal but also a man with a moral compass that won't allow him to walk away from responsibility, whether it be with Ernie or his own family.

Jenna-Lee Hyde rounded out the three-person cast, taking on a lion's share of the roles in the play. While her main role was as Mae, Ernie's speech therapist, Hyde also served as a waitress, a lawyer, a bank teller, a retirement home director and a fisherman.

Hyde was delightfully wonderful and it was remarkable to watch her morph into her many characters.

The play touched on many serious issues but, as in real life, humour found its way into the interaction of the characters. Whether it was Ernie providing vague answers or expressing himself with a litany of nonsensical words while George tried to make sense of it all, there were many moments of true laughter.

Here's a quick example — Ernie replies to a question from George with, "Turkey diet." When George asks, "What's that?", Ernie quickly replies, "I don't know but I think I used to do it." Ernie delivers the line with the utmost confidence which isn't shaken by the befuddled look on George's face.

As Ernie's condition begins to improve, more of his personality is revealed to George and the audience through comments and advice that cuts right to the heart of the matter. When George is almost overwhelmed by some personal problems, it's Ernie that reminds him that, "You have noticed that life isn't always cooperative."

The play is directed by Marti Maraden, who has become a regular at Globe Theatre having previously directed *Much Ado About Nothing* (2014), *Pride & Prejudice* (2013) and *The 39 Steps* (2012).

Joining Maraden on the creative team are Wes Pearce (set and costume designer), Louise Guinand (lighting designer), Gilles Zolty (composer and sound designer), Marylu Moyer (stage manager) and Alana Freistadt (apprentice stage manager).

The Secret Mask runs through March 20.

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