

Building blocks

Tale of men behind Guthrie Theater makes for good theater

Sometimes, making good theater is all in the packaging.

For instance, a play about a construction project is a snooze. But if that project is the old Guthrie Theater, and if that play imagines the workings between the bombastic Tyrone Guthrie and mild-mannered Minnesota architect Ralph Rapson, well then, maybe you've got something.

Have the sharp-penned and prolific local playwright Jeffrey Hatcher write the thing, and you're on a roll. Cast Steve Hendrickson as Guthrie and Mark Benninghofen as Rapson and have sure-footed Ron Peluso stage it at the History Theatre - which knows well how to use the past as its muse - and I'm sold.

On the face of it, "Tyrone and Ralph" might seem to be the kind of insider-y play that would appeal only to those in the theatrical community. But Hatcher has cracked open the world of these two giant talents, and revealed them to be humans like the rest of us - insecure, doubt-filled, proud and sentimental.

Beginning with their shotgun wedding of a collaboration in 1959, the play follows the endless head-butting between two men who both knew they wanted something new but didn't exactly know what "new" looked like.

Working mainly in a comic vein, Hatcher gooses history to heighten the tale into a stageworthy drama, giving us a feeling for their relationship rather than a chapter-and-verse account. I doubt, for instance, whether Guthrie and Rapson ever actually dueled in their disagreement of a thrust stage versus a more flexible space. But



their literal sword-crossing on stage works gets the point across entertainingly, as does much of the script.

It's not enough for Guthrie to tell Rapson, for instance, his desired dimensions of the playing area. He has to demonstrate, club-footing his way through the opening speech of "Richard III" to mark out how large a stage must be to accommodate it. Hendrickson tears into this moment with scenery-chewing relish, and while he uses all the bright and loud colors to sketch Guthrie, he can also paint with subtler hues, recounting a triumphant production of "Hamlet" pulled from the jaws of disaster.

And he can go quieter still, showing us a man at the peak of his creative powers reluctant to give up the summit. "I do not regret my mistakes," Hendrickson's Guthrie allows in a moment of introspection. "I regret not doing my best."

Benninghofen is a triumph of Minnesota Nice as Rapson. He plays the role with an impassive

face, seldom raising his voice, and his Rapson treats his high-strung client with a mixture of tolerance and compliance. But the playwright gives Rapson some teeth, and Benninghofen isn't afraid to bare them, however discreetly.

When he defies Guthrie's idea to duplicate the thrust stage at Canada's Stratford Festival as boring, he tosses the word off with a caustic casualness (though Hendrickson's Guthrie reacts like a vampire showered with garlic). And when Guthrie suggests another architect to design the building's exterior, Benninghofen's Rapson cuts him off with the closest thing a Minnesotan can conjure to menace.

Peluso blends these performances nicely, and on Erik E. Paulson's evocative set — a blueprint-painted stage set off with distinctively round-edge reminders of the old Guthrie's architecture — he and the History Theatre have conjured a wry and winning look at our not-too-distant past.