

Intriguing Set Doesn't Save 'Spoon River'

By RON BELPEDIO

The current Eastern Illinois University Theater production of Spoon River Anthology, a graveyard drama, is probably the slowest play I have ever seen performed at Eastern.

But, in realizing that a great deal can often be learned from the bad, I was not one of the people who left the show at the intermission. I stayed and sat through it all. It's an old show (originally written in 1915 as a book) and there just isn't any plot. A combination of spoken-from-the-grave autobio-

graphies make up the entire show. A few songs are thrown in to break up the monotony, and two strolling guitarists dramatically strum along during a few of the vignettes. But as a whole, the show just doesn't work. Dead people just aren't interesting to watch.

The costuming had a lot to do with the failure of the play. All the actors are dressed in grey. Their outfits range from businessmen to a Flash Gordon imitation. I honestly wonder what Miss Wentworth was thinking of when she designed

the costumes. Most of the actors look overweight (when they truly aren't), and I found it very difficult to believe that rotting corpses would look so pleasantly healthy. Usually I can understand the intent of a design (whether I like it or not) but the costumes in this show have me confused.

The lighting for the show does deserve some special mention. Effects were used during the sunrise at the end of the play that were very impressive. It was definitely the most innovative use of lighting that I

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have seen in that theater. But there was also the biggest fault in lighting I have seen. For some reason there were two harsh bright lights at both sides of the stage. They seemed to get in the way. I don't think lighting should be so obvious. The man next to me chuckled every time one of the lights was used, and patting his wife I heard him say, "There it is again." If this was the audience reaction that

Miss Gober, the lighting designer, had in mind then she was successful.

The most difficult part of reviewing for me has been with the acting. I find it easier to simply relate what I have seen than to try and constructively criticize individual actors. Let the actors take responsibility for improving their skill. I will describe what I saw in the theater. Toni Canell did a great job with her character, especially her short vignette of a Chinese girl out of place in Spoon River. Miss Canell was a very bright spot in a dull evening. Kevin Rettke was another interesting actor to

watch. He and Miss Canell were the only two actors that managed to bring their characters to life. I think the people in charge of choosing a play for production should notice that a lot of very competent actors didn't even try out for Spoon River. And I can't blame them. Actors can make a play a success if they feel that the play is good to begin with. If they don't even bother to try out, then somebody should read the script again.

I was embarrassed for Julie Woolsley and Dan Dionne when they walked on stage singing "The Water is Wide." Pathetic is the only word to describe

their distorted harmony. I began wondering, when the audience started squirming in their seats, if Dr. Sullivan the director of the play, had lost his hearing.

I could continue to cite examples of embarrassment, but I don't want to overdo it. I'll point out another good aspect of the play instead (although by this time in the review they're getting hard to find). Chris Phillips' set design was very intriguing, mixing the form of outstretched people into the trees, but unfortunately, the direction of the play had the actors tromping back and forth over the set too many times. Like

cattle, they went back and forth.

But then I said I wasn't going to harp on the bad. And in that case, this is the end of the review. I only hope that something was learned from this experience so that I won't have to sit through a play like this again when the theater department has so many competent people to work with. Ticket prices being \$3.50 for adults and \$2.00 for students. I think audiences deserve something better.

The play will be presented again Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. in the theater of the Dounda Fine Arts Center.

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