

New talent takes bow in 'Breach'

By CARL LEBOVITZ
Critic at Large

It's not often that we get to see a new work by a budding playwright in these parts. A few years ago Tanya Wood and her 619 Monroe Players gave us EIU faculty member David Radavich's *Nevertheless..* and the now-defunct Friends & Co. Resident Theatre of Charleston Susan Bennett's *Xenophobia, Mitochondria, and the Nuclear Farm Family*.

Right now Eastern is presenting *Once More Unto the Breach*, an original script by theatre arts major Robert Caisley, as a scholarship fund benefit. Originally from England and just turned 21, the author is a transfer student from Rockford College, and *Breach* is his maiden effort.

The setting is the cancer ward of a hospital "somewhere in the Midwest." Albert is an 18-year-old Hodgkin's disease patient who has been there since he was 15, when he was diagnosed as "Stage 4-B with a

15 percent chance of living," but his heart and strength have kept pulling him through ever since. His new roommate is Owen, who is there for tests, and the play is about the relationship that develops between them over the course of four months as they learn to live and perhaps to die with each other.

There are certain limitations to a hospital-room setting. Albert and Owen get into and out of bed, go to the bathroom, put on or take off a robe or cap, and look out the window, and occasionally a nurse or their doctor comes in. The author overcomes this to some extent by giving us a series of short scenes, six in the first act, seven in the second, complete with fade-ins and fade-outs, thus achieving a certain cinematic effect. It's a little like the 17th-century French playwright Marivaux, who turned practically every exit or entrance into a new scene.

In some respects *Breach* resembles another hospital-room drama, Brian Clark's *Whose Life Is It Anyway?*, but there you had the verbal fireworks of the legal,

ethical, moral and medical arguments as to whether a patient permanently paralyzed from the neck down from an auto accident should be allowed to die with dignity.

In *Breach* there are some verbal fireworks, too, but mostly of the wisecrack kind, coming from Albert, who is a nonstop gabber — with a purpose: "to keep my mind sharp," he says. The author gives him some funny, occasionally pungent one-liners — "She was so naive, she thought an orgasm was the Japanese art of paper-folding"; "Rain is like throwing toothpicks on you, but you can't catch them."

In the Eastern production, Albert is brought to vivid life by newcomer Jeff Hess, also a Rockford transfer student, who plays him like a sort of young Jack Lemmon, breezy and brusque on the outside, masking the anger, fear and vulnerability on the inside, and always extremely likable. It's a virtuoso performance that shifts easily back and forth between the comic and the serious without descending to bathos.

Owen, nicely played by Robert Eli Poe, is a more introverted, passive type who serves essentially as a sounding board for Albert.

The doctor is played by J. Kenneth Barnett and the pretty young nurse by Ana O. Cooper (by making the nurse someone older and a bit crotchety, the playwright could have added a touch of spice to the proceedings).

The set and costumes are by Jack A. Smith, the technical direction by Douglas D. Molash, and the sound by Bill Stepinski.

And under C.P. Blanchette's sensitive direction, it all works beautifully and, the night I was there, had the audience laughing and at least one young lady crying at the end.

The title, of course, comes from Shakespeare's *Henry V*. I think the Bard would be pleased with his new young colleague.

The final performances are at 8 p.m. Friday and 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday in the Fine Arts Center Playroom. Call 581-3110.



Jeff Hess, Rob Poe