

Controversial play deals with domestic violence

If the choice was between dreaming and dying, what would you choose?

Two college-age actresses relived the repressions of the 1890s as they performed a controversial one-act play called "Al Takes a Bride" Oct. 19 through 21, at the Delavan Art Center, Building C, 501 W. Fayette St., just a stone's throw from downtown. The play by Gary Sunshine presents a dramatic, life-changing give-and-take between two young Memphis women who have fallen in love with each other despite the strictures of the Victorian Era.

The play, as produced here by The Kings Theatre, represented an ambitious effort to raise consciousnesses in our own sometimes backward burg. The show ran in conjunction with a Delavan display of a Violence-Survivor Art Show, coordinated by Vera House Inc. Vera House's Art of Caring program presents visual and performing arts in support of the house's mission of service to victims of domestic and sexual violence.

Marriage on the Mississippi

Victoria King, who directed "Al Takes a Bride," really drew out some fine work from those two young actresses, Dana Abrams and Kristin Kelly and from Earl Arnold who was perfect as the judge with a secret life. Alice (played by Abrams) calls herself "Al" and calls her lover Freda "Fred." As Alice's family prepares to move from Memphis because of their daughter's homosexual leanings, Al devises a plan for she and Freda to escape together down the river to New Orleans. She invites the judge to join them in matrimony on the banks of the Mississippi. Then, as they say, all hell breaks loose.

Careful casting can bring a production more than halfway home, and King certainly achieved that with this show. And while most community theater directors simply dispense with regional accents, King coaxed pitch-perfect, soft Tennessee drawls from all three members of "Al's" cast. The Southern accents were just right, not forced but natural and, most importantly, consistent.

Authentic period costumes

Speaking of verisimilitude, Alice's and Freda's multi-layered costumes and their 1890s' hairstyles were all carefully designed by Marcia Ames. Her attention to detail with those on-again-off-again costumes was superb, even when Alice stripped down in order to change into a man's three-piece suit. Alice's corset, which peeked out from under her bodice only a few times during her rougher tumbles, was still a telling reminder of how women of that era were so completely confined and restricted both literally and figuratively. Ames also created authentic Victorian hairstyles. Alice wore head-tight braids while Freda sported a Gibson Girl coif which clearly evoked the era.

Phil D'Alessandro designed the lighting, and though the program listed no credit for stage design, the sparse set was right on as well. Its tall grass suggested the riverbank setting, with rather majestic tree branches fully framing the action, while an old wooden swing represented the central metaphor: this relationship could swing either way.

Previous productions of "Al Takes a Bride" in Manhattan and elsewhere climaxed with Alice brandishing a bloody razor. That could be a shocking, even sensational image, but King wisely chose here to stage the violence completely offstage in one of theater's oldest traditions.

Victim-advocate speaks

Proceeds from "Al Takes a Bride" benefited Vera House.

At a talkback after the opening night performance on Oct. 19, one of the panelists was Christina Carney, who is herself a talented local actress. During the talkback, however, Carney dropped all artifice as she discussed her Vera House day-job as a victim-advocate. A situation such as that portrayed in "Al Takes a Bride," Carney said, "is tragic on so many levels. It's not OK to have to live in darkness or live a lie. Those shouldn't be the only options." Even the term domestic violence is "misleading," she added. "It's actually an ongoing pattern of controlling behavior including economic and sexual abuse." Most abusers consider their partners as property, Carney said. "'You're my possession,' they say. 'I own you!'"

For information on Vera House's Art of Caring program, contact project coordinator Crystal LaPoint (herself a talented musician and composer) at 425-0818, ext. 212.