

FROM THE MARIN INDEPENDENT JOURNAL, 22 MARCH 2001

## Performers ring true in 'The Subject was Roses'

By Charles Brousse (IJ correspondent)

You might go to the theater every night for the rest of your life and never have the good fortune to see a cast better suited to a play than the three actors - Will Marchetti, Meg Mackay, and Steven Rhyne – currently performing Frank D. Gilroy's "The Subject was Roses" at the Spreckles Performing Arts Center in Rohnert Park. It helps, of course, that there are only three because that leaves less margin for error, but the achievement (in which director Ken Sonkin must share) is no less notable.

Although it had a reasonably successful Broadway run in 1964 and brought the author a Pulitzer Prize a year later, 'Roses' belongs nowhere near the top rank of American theater which had reached a new benchmark in Edward Albee's sardonic "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?" (1962). Nor does it embody any of the stylistic innovations that were changing theater worldwide during the 60s. Instead, with its naïve sentimentality and straightforward naturalism, Gilroy's play feels like a throwback to the immediate post World War II era in which it is set. How ironic, then, that the Pacific Alliance Stage Company is presenting "Roses" in the smaller of Spreckles' two spaces, the Bette Condiotti Experimental Theatre.

Yet, the choice is a happy one because it allows the audience, seated on three sides of designer John Connole's comfortably furnished Bronx apartment, circa 1946, to feel that they, too, are part of the household. As the play opens, 21-year-old Timmy Cleary, still wearing his uniform, has just returned home after being discharged from the Army.

By his own admission, he wasn't exactly a hero, but that doesn't deter his proud Irish-American father, John Cleary, from treating him like one, a celebration in which his mother Nettie willingly joins. Within hours, however, the alcohol-fueled bonhomie deteriorates, compelling each of them to re-examine long held family resentments.

For those who have followed the career of Marin-based Will Marchetti, his triumph as John Cleary will come as no surprise. Having brought similar characters to the stage with great distinction in such plays as Arthur Miller's "A View from the Bridge" and "Death of a Salesman" (both for Theater Artists of Marin), as well as Sam Shepard's "Fool for Love" at San Francisco's Magic Theatre, the role of the bitterly conflicted husband/father fits him like a glove. Marchetti is blessed with a wonderfully resonant voice, the intelligence to know how to be "in" every moment, and superb physical presence - all of which are on display through his "Roses" performance.

More unexpected is Meg Mackay's ability to stay with Marchetti scene for scene. Previously known almost entirely for her work in musical comedy, she emerges here as a dramatic actress to be reckoned with. It is fascinating to watch her stand her ground against her husband's excesses, even as that same rigidity is gradually perceived to be a source of his frustration.

Steven Rhyne is riveting in the pivotal role of Timmy Cleary. His is a voyage of discovery as he confronts the uneasy relationship with his father, is compelled to re-evaluate an earlier assumption that his mother was the innocent victim and, finally, makes the wrenching decision that if he is ever to assert his own identity he must depart the nest forever. As he confides to Nettie near the end of the play, "Three years ago I blamed Dad. Yesterday, I blamed you. Now, I see nobody is to blame, not even me." Rhyne tackles this psychologically complex character with an assurance and versatility rarely found in a 22-year-old actor.

Ken Sonkin's imaginative directorial touch is frequently evident, particularly in exuberant celebratory scenes like the family's noisy return from a baseball game at Yankee Stadium on the second night of Timmy's homecoming. His sound design, featuring snippets from old radio programs, helps to establish a '40s context, as do Mary Jo Goss' fine period costumes.

But this evening belongs first and foremost to the actors.

Watching them at work from the Condiotti's ringside seats is an experience to be savored.

— Charles Brousse