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This *Sylvia* No Dog

By Wilson Hutton

At the opening night performance of A.R.Gurney's *Sylvia*, one audience member took a greater than usual interest in the proceedings. A seeing-eye dog in the front row--who had begun the evening perched motionless under its owner's seat, the very picture of professional decorum--several times during the first act became so excited that it seemed a slip of the lead away from joining the actors on stage. Perhaps it was merely unaccustomed to all the lights and noise and movement, or perhaps it recognized a kindred spirit in the play. For the title character in *Sylvia*, the Pennsylvania Centre Stage season opener which plays through May 29 at the Pavilion, is a dog--albeit a dog played by an actress in kneepads and a heart-shaped collar tag.

It's a domestic comedy about a domesticated animal and the middle-aged couple whose marriage she nearly topples. Greg and Kate's children are grown. He's at loose ends, dissatisfied with his job. She's taken up a career in midlife and is prospering, on her own. Then one day, while playing hooky from the office, Greg finds a stray dog in the park and brings her home.

Kate is not pleased. "I want my freedom," she says, elaborating, "I want freedom from dogs." It's not just hair on the sofa and pee stains on the rug she's leery of; it's the fast-growing bond between Greg and Sylvia -- the eros of pet ownership. In shaggy, limpid-eyed Sylvia, Kate instinctively recognizes a rival for Greg's affections. What develops is a love triangle--just as real, and nearly as sticky, as the kind in which all participants walk upright.

We tend to talk to our dogs as though they were people, and we like to imagine that they understand us. Sylvia, a dog played by an attractive young actress (Sarah Jessica Parker originated the role in *New York*) is the embodiment of this conceit. And it is a very cleverly realized conceit: Sylvia the stray has a distinctly homeless look. Sylvia in heat dresses provocatively and acts flirty and mysterious. Sylvia confronting a cat in the street cuts loose with a stream of expletives that would make a trucker blush. Gurney has done a remarkable thing with this character--he's taken the thoughts we imagine our dogs thinking when they gaze into our eyes, or growl at a cat, or go out in search of a little doggie romance, and expressed them in terms that are not only credibly canine, but fundamentally human too. Sylvia is to Greg what a fling with a younger woman might be to another man in midlife crisis. The character's shadings, from flea-bitten hound to glamorous Other Woman, are so subtle that it's hard to tell where the dog leaves off and the girlfriend begins.

Director Robert Leonard, whose recent student production of *Much Ado About Nothing* was a barrel of laughs, again delivers the comedic goods here. The ensemble is tight, the pace appropriately brisk. The cast substitutes volume for conviction in some spots (it is a rather noisy play for so small a cast and so intimate a space) but does fine work overall. Peggy Scott and John D. McNally are solid as the couple in crisis, and Barbra Andrews, a student actress from Colorado who's done the role before, is a charming and sure-footed Sylvia. Ken Sonkin handles all the play's secondary roles, switching characters--and genders--with an aplomb that would make Mike Meyers jealous.

Sylvia is about the unique man-beast relationship that began, as one character put it, when the first wolf crept cautiously to the edge of a prehistoric campfire. It is also about an even more primal bond: that between the male and the female. "I'm the 'other'," Sylvia says to Greg. "That's never happened to you before, that's why it's so exciting."

Gurney's script is funny, intelligent, and commendably ambitious, going off on numerous pointed philosophical riffs on men, dogs, men and dogs, empty nest syndrome, and male menopause. It's not without a few clinkers: a scene in which Sylvia is found to be in heat is, despite several gem-quality moments, largely awkward and unfocused. Then there's an atrocious scene in which the playwright goes for cheap laughs (and gets them, alas) with a hoary gag involving Sylvia humping a visitor's leg. It's a cruel thing, and a weird choice on the playwright's part, to impose so boyish a bit of business as leg humping on so exquisitely female a character.

There's some postmodern philosophizing about constructed reality, and it occasionally strays into areas that are, well, a little dicey. (Woman? Dog? Who can tell the difference?) But in the end, it's all in fun, and this is an accomplished production.

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