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STAGE REVIEW

A lift from Sleeping Weazel's satirical 'Blues'

By Terry Byrne | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 10, 2014



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“27 Tips for Banishing the Blues” follows a woman’s quest to cure her depression.

“27 Tips for Banishing the Blues” gathers a deliriously silly collection of aphorisms and advice into a “multimedia hootenanny.” But lurking beneath the zany surface of Charlotte Meehan’s play, which is having its world premiere at the Boston Playwrights’ Theatre, is a thoughtful look at our struggle to balance despair with hope.

The play, the latest production from the always-surprising Sleeping Weazel, opens with the house lights up as we watch a woman struggle to get comfortable in her bed. As she awkwardly shifts positions, fluffs her pillows, and rearranges the bedclothes, the audience absorbs her restlessness, which helps keep us slightly off balance for the rapid-fire dreamscape that follows. To distract her from her discomfort, our hero (the remarkably versatile Veronica Wiseman)

turns on the TV. Once she hears her symptoms blithely listed by a perky announcer, our heroine — only referred to as Mommy — realizes she suffers from depression and embarks on an on-again, off-again effort to find a cure.

From the safety of her bed, she watches toothpaste ads and a Spanish telenovela mash up against a bossy cooking show chef, a TV astrologer, and a lurid self-help guru (a terrific Mark Cohen) who entreats his audience to “get real!” The snippets of commercials and TV segments, projected on three separate screens above the stage, have that discordant feeling of a busy thumb on the remote control, but Seaghan McKay’s imaginative video design creates an unexpected symmetry between these seemingly disconnected pieces.

Just when we are ready to dismiss “27 Tips” as a series of comic sketches, an image of a young boy appears on a screen, and we hear a voice calling, “Mommy, get up, I’m hungry, come play with me.” Suddenly, Meehan has raised the stakes: Mommy’s depression could endanger her son.

She tries to rally, but sleep and TV are too seductive. As we watch a TV nutritionist recommend eating “good mood foods,” the borders of Mommy’s bedroom fall away and we drift completely into her subconscious. We watch a variety of scenes populated by an array of nameless individuals, from the melodramatic characters of the telenovela to a gay man struggling with paralyzing neuroses. Seven ensemble members morph into a variety of characters, performing scenes that sometimes include Mommy and sometimes do not.

Director Kenneth Prestininzi directs the apparent chaos with a fluid understanding of Meehan’s theme and a deft sense of timing, both for the audience and his ensemble. At those periodic moments when the action feels like it’s starting to spin out of control, Prestininzi gathers the seven onstage actors for a bit of loose-limbed choreography to the tune of “Swing, Swing, Swing,” Janis Joplin’s “Try (Just a Little Bit Harder)” and “Down on Me,” and the Isley Brothers’ “Shout.” Rather than stop the action, these mini production numbers allow the audience to take a breath and see connections that were flying by in the sketches.

Meehan’s forthright approach to a challenging topic, along with her playful approach to dramatic possibilities, make “27 Tips” a delightful comic romp that still leaves the audience with a deeper insight into a struggle with depression.

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